

NEW

THE MEN AND MACHINES THAT WAGED THE FÜHRER'S WAR

# HITLER'S ELITE

From the makers of  
**HISTORY  
WAR**



  
**7 DEADLY  
SOLDIERS**  
MEET THE WEHRMACHT'S  
MOST FORMIDABLE  
TROOPS

**Digital  
Edition**

**FUTURE**

SECOND  
EDITION



GUDERIAN ✠ TIGER TANK ✠ DÖNITZ ✠ FALLSCHIRMJÄGER ✠ MANSTEIN ✠ SKORZENY



“ HE WHO WOULD LIVE MUST FIGHT. HE  
WHO DOESN'T WISH TO FIGHT IN THIS  
WORLD, WHERE PERMANENT STRUGGLE IS THE  
LAW OF LIFE, HAS NOT THE RIGHT TO EXIST”

ADOLF HITLER





# Welcome

**A**dolf Hitler possessed a stark view of the world and the species that inhabited it. To his mind, Earth was a finite space bearing finite resources, and it was the eternal fate of humanity to fight among itself in order to secure the land and food required for survival. This extreme belief in social Darwinism cultivated a view that in order for Germany to avoid the ignominy of another defeat on the battlefield and secure the future her people deserved a new world order would have to be carved out, and war was the only tool by which this could be achieved. But how would this war be fought, by whom, and with what weaponry? In this latest study of the Nazi war machine you will meet the elite units that enabled Germany to infiltrate behind enemy lines and conduct her lightening war. You'll also get a glimpse inside the minds of some of the finest commanders ever to serve Germany, including Heinz Guderian, Erwin Rommel and Karl Dönitz. Then it will be time to clamber into a Tiger tank and find out why this formidable vehicle struck fear into all who opposed it before you descend into the depths of the Atlantic as part of a wolfpack. Upon resurfacing you will take to the skies with the Luftwaffe's most lethal pilots before heading into the fray with the Wehrmacht's deadliest warriors. The men and machines that executed Hitler's global war await you.









# HITLER'S ELITE

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of  
WAR**  
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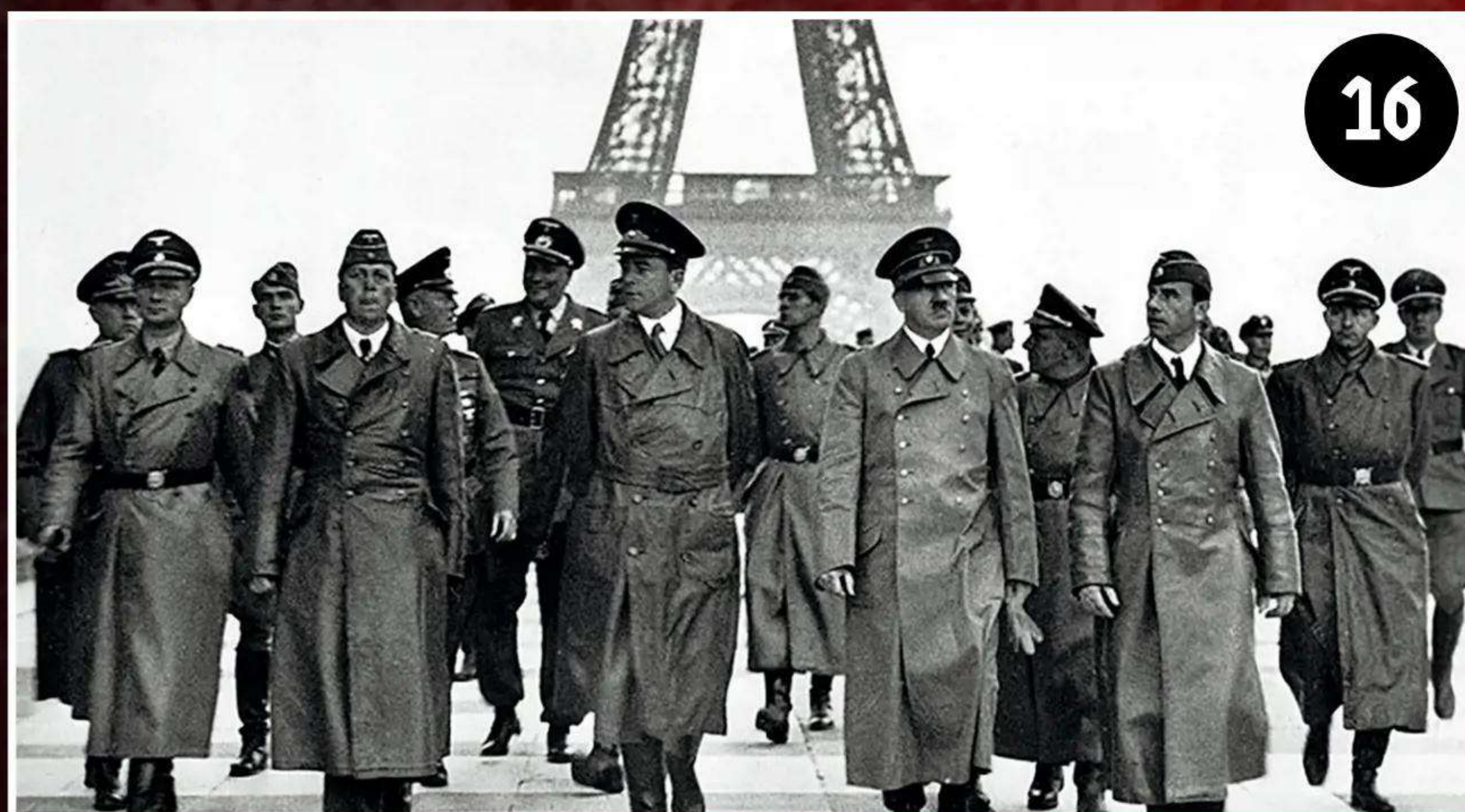
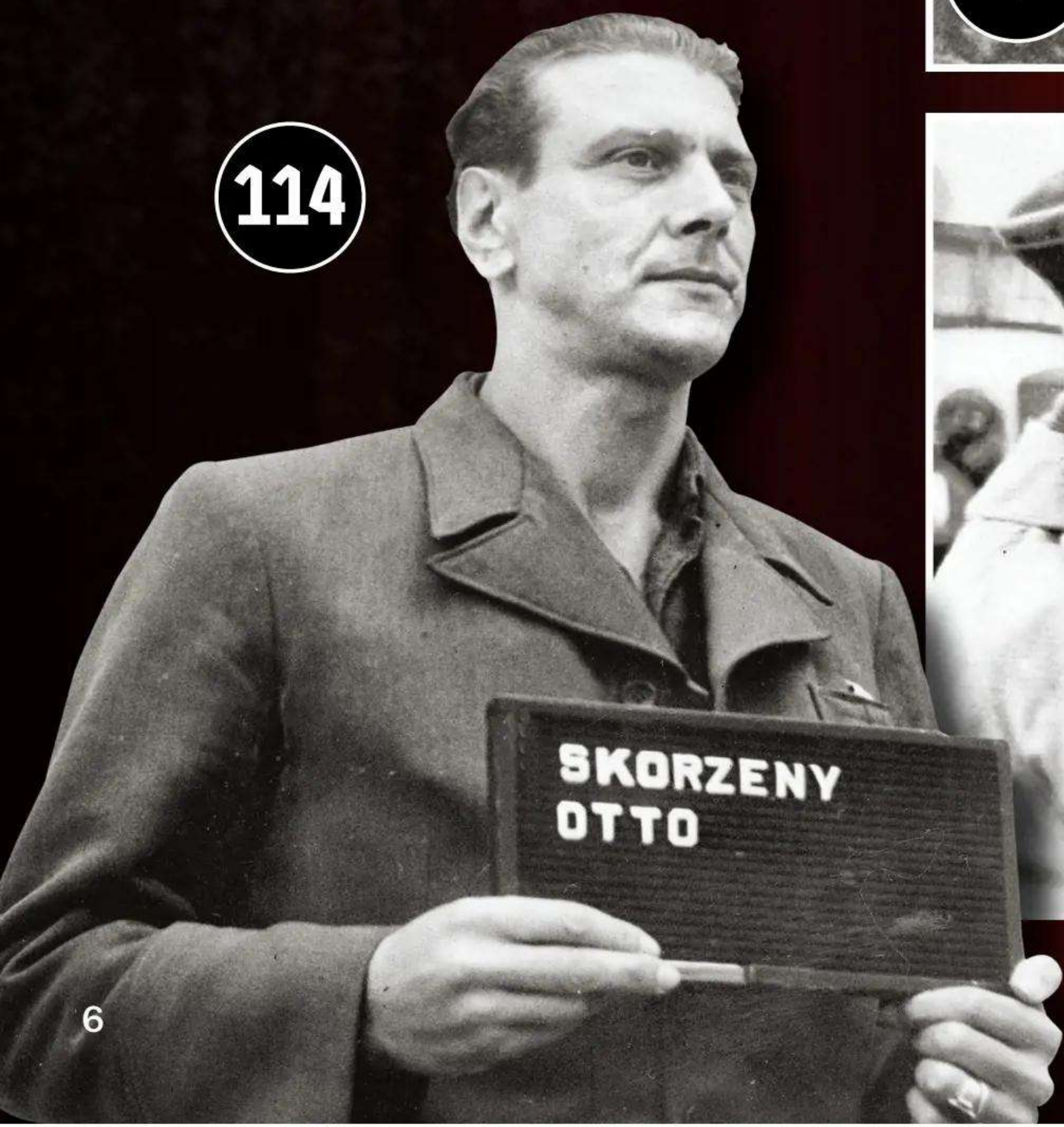
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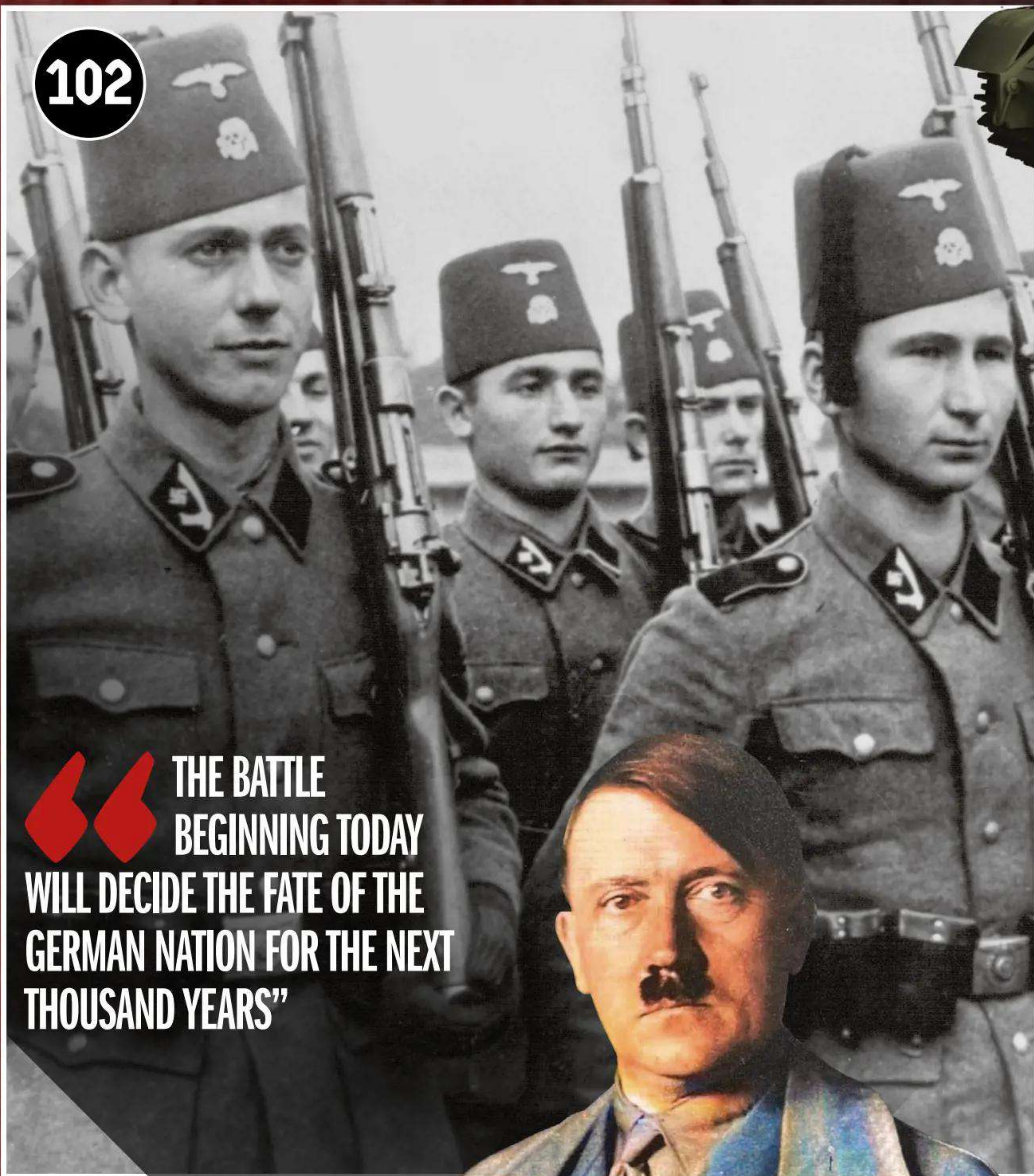
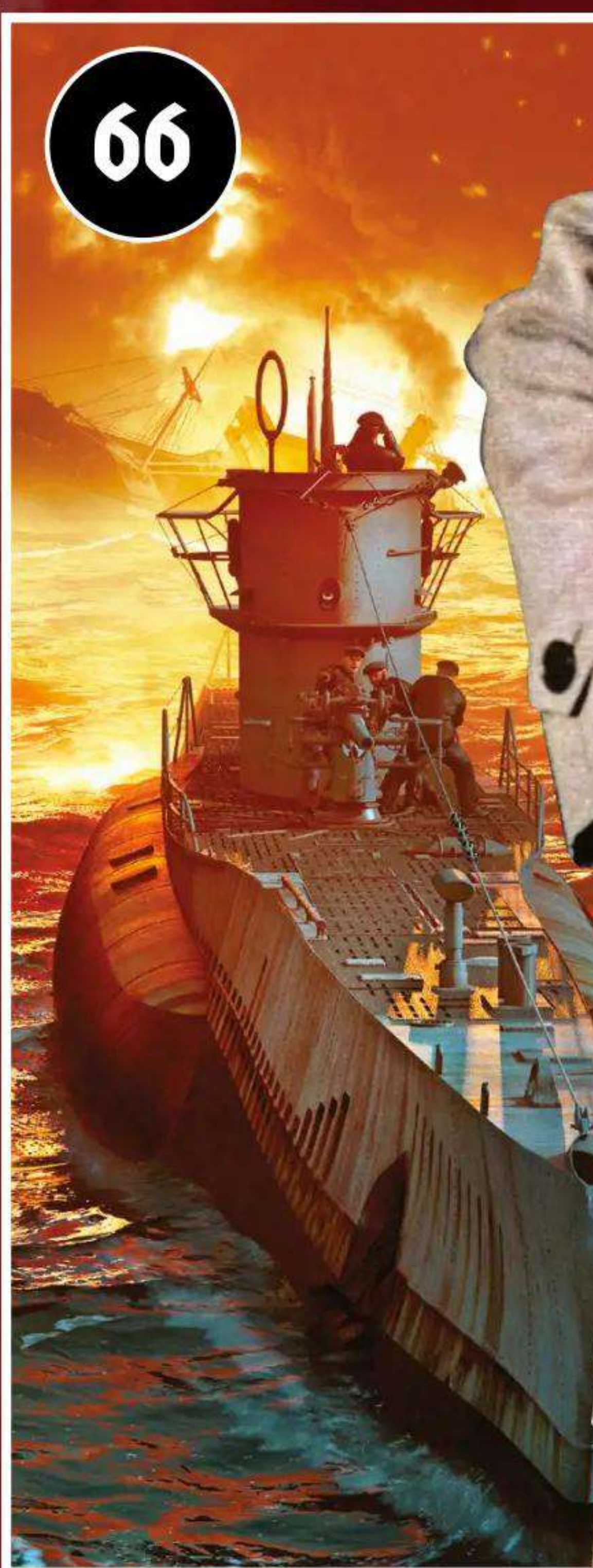
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“THE EUROPE OF THE 1930S, DESPITE BEING EXHAUSTED BY WORLD WAR I AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION, WAS ALSO FEROCIOUSLY IDEOLOGICAL, WITH NUMEROUS REGIME CHANGES AND EXPERIMENTAL POLITICS SHAKING THE CONTINENT”

Soldiers of the Condor Legion stand in front of a He 111



# FLIGHT<sup>OF</sup> HITLER'S CONDOR LEGION



After quietly nurturing the rebirth of the German military through 'civilian' organisations, in 1936 the chance came to test the reformed Wehrmacht

WORDS ALEXANDER PURTO



**O**n 17 July 1936, international attention was drawn to Spain following a swift coup d'état in Spanish Morocco and Spain's Overseas Territories by the conservative, right-wing 'Nationalist' Forces of the military. The 'pronunciamiento' quickly spread across continental Spain, with the rebels seizing Seville and several other small towns in the south and north-west. This finally prompted the democratically elected republican government to distribute arms to sections of its multi-ideological, leftist, civilian population. The harsh polarisation of Spain between a leftist, progressive, socialist republic and a right-wing, conservative, absolutist reaction quickly became representative of European attitudes at the time.

The Europe of the 1930s, despite being exhausted by World War I and the Great Depression, was also ferociously ideological, with numerous regime changes and

experimental politics shaking the continent. Europe was under the 'spectre of communism', and a series of revolutions and leftist violence throughout the continent prompted the rise of nationalist Third-Position politics, such as fascism and Nazism, in countries including Germany, Austria, Italy and Portugal.

In light of this clash of ideologies, the geological position of Spain made it a vital decider of the European conflict in the years to come. The Soviet Union, which had signed a treaty of mutual assistance with France in 1935, sought to establish a 'Red Bastion' in the far west.

Conversely, Adolf Hitler saw that the installation of a right-wing government to the south of France would put pressure on the radical left-wing French government and further antagonise the ideological conflict between the communists and 'Croix de Feu' fascists in France at the time.



# The fight for Spain

**17 JULY 1936 SAW THE SPANISH STATE VIOLENTLY FRACTURE IN TWO, AS EUROPEAN HEADS OF STATE WATCHED WITH BAITED BREATH**

Spain in the 20th century was a political powder keg. The overthrowing of Queen Isabella II in 1868 and the abdication of a potential successor in 1873 led to the proclamation of the First Spanish Republic. While the First Republic was hampered by instability and soon collapsed in the Bourbon Restoration of 1874, it did enable a whirlwind of new political concepts to take root in Spain.

The Restoration was greeted by an antagonised working class, and the following 53 years of political instability led to fears of a communist revolution against the monarchy, prompting the seizure of state power by the military under Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923. When support for the new regime yet again dwindled, a Second Republic was proclaimed on 12 April 1931.

The Second Republic did not solve the political strife, but rather emphasised two distinct political factions – a

progressive, left-leaning Popular Front, and a conservative, reactionary 'Confederation'. The next six years were characterised by street violence and discontent with the ever-reshuffling, ever-antagonistic governments. Following the 1936 election and widespread factional violence, the political powder keg finally exploded. The seizure of Spanish Morocco by a conservative, right-wing military on 17 July 1936 jump-started a conflict that would quickly threaten to become an international crisis and one that would demonstrate the ineptness of the Western governments in the face of a pressing Nazi Germany.

Crucially, the war would allow Hitler to distract the world from his Central European plan, seize the resources needed for the future of the German rearmament, test new warfare and innovations and establish a fascist ally to the south of a nervous and divided France.

## The Reich to the rescue

It was no surprise, then, that when General Francisco Franco found himself stranded in Morocco with an army comprising 35,000 religious zealots from the Spanish-Moroccan 'Army of Africa' and 30,000 defecting Spanish soldiers, he was quick to look to the Third Reich for help. The Spanish Republic had assembled a naval blockade in the Strait of Gibraltar, and it didn't seem possible to transport such an overwhelming number of military personnel.

Nevertheless, by 26 July, just six days after General Franco's initial request for aid in the transport of his army to the Iberian Peninsula, nine German Junkers Ju 52 transport aircraft landed in Tetouan, Morocco. An additional 11 Ju 52s were bundled into a support package of 86 'volunteer' military personnel, 16 experimental aircraft, 30 anti-aircraft guns and 100 tons of military equipment and loaded onto the Usaramo, a German passenger ship bound for the Spanish port town of Cadiz.

This initial package would be the beginnings of what would evolve into the infamous Condor Legion. Its initial days would be shrouded in the mystery of Operation Magic Fire/Guido – an attempt by Hitler to secure his interests in Spain while avoiding the unnecessary antagonism of Western states. The operation was undertaken in the utmost secrecy, with the state-run company Sociedad Hispano-Marroquí de Transportes (HISMA – Spanish Moroccan Transport Company) being established for the sole purpose of providing a civilian facade to the blatantly militaristic airlift operation.

Starting on 28 July, the nine Ju 52s conducted up to five transport flights a day between continental Spain and its Moroccan possession. There was a sense of urgency in the operation, with German pilots transporting up to 40 fully equipped Nationalist troops per journey, a quantity well above the recommended quota of 17 persons.

Despite the operation of the Ju 52s well beyond their functional capacity, there was only one incident resulting in the loss of an aircraft. On 15 August, a cargo-vacant Ju 52 crashed in the municipality of Jerez de la Frontera – the cause was presumed to be severe engine deterioration and failure caused by the continuous operation in the Northern African environment. As such, extensive operation of aircraft in such harsh environments provided the Nazis with useful information that would later be employed during the North African Campaign in World War II.

With the arrival of the Usaramo and its cargo in Cadiz on 6 August 1936, the first reformation of the Nazi operation in Spain began. Initially with the purpose of supplying and training Nationalist troops, the operation underwent a small evolution after it became apparent it would be more effective for the Nazi pilots to conduct sorties, rather than relying on the Spanish

**THIS INITIAL PACKAGE  
WOULD BE THE BEGINNINGS  
OF WHAT WOULD EVOLVE INTO THE  
INFAMOUS CONDOR LEGION"**



*Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) propaganda emphasising the supposed foreign origins of the enemy was prevalent on both sides of the conflict*



# MACHINES OF THE LEGION

NOT ONLY DID THE CONDOR LEGION PROVIDE A PLATFORM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY VIA EVALUATION, IT ALSO ALLOWED OLD TECHNOLOGY TO BE IMPLEMENTED IN NEW WAYS

**"THE INNOVATIVE, AUTOMATIC PULL-UP DIVE BRAKES ENABLED PILOTS TO DIVE AT TARGETS WITH THE CONFIDENCE THAT THE PLANE WOULD RECOVER, EVEN IF THE PILOT BLACKED OUT"**

## JUNKERS JU 87 'STUKA'

Faced with the threat of superior Soviet weaponry, the Condor Legion needed to innovate in order to succeed. The answer came in the inverted gull wings and fixed spatted undercarriage of the Model 87, from German manufacturer Junkers Flugzeug und Motorenwerke AG.

Sturdy and accurate, the Ju 87 was soon found to be an effective ground attack aircraft, earning it the name of 'Stuka', from 'Sturzkampfflugzeug', the German word for 'dive bomber'. The innovative, automatic pull-up dive brakes enabled pilots to dive at targets with the confidence that the plane would recover, even if the pilot blacked out.

At the suggestion of an air technician, Wolfram von Richthofen had a propeller-powered siren added to the exterior of the craft. The wailing siren, known as a 'Jericho Trumpet' was a foray into experimental psychological warfare by the Nazis, and would become the defining characteristic of the aircraft.

The Ju 87, while being introduced towards the end of the war in Spain, arrived at a crucial time, and as well being the first aircraft to be utilised in the Knickebein system, (a system of night-time bombing wherein the aircraft was blindly guided towards the target via radio communication), the Stuka would make its name in Spain. It was an important tool of the Condor Legion in iconic clashes, such as the Battle of Bilbao and the Catalonia Offensive.

*Although the Stuka had a maximum bomb load of 500kg, this could only be carried if the gunner vacated his seat*

*The Ju 52 could be used in transport roles and as a bomber*



## JUNKERS JU 52 'IRON ANNIE'

The Ju 52 was arguably the most important contribution by the Nazi government to Franco's Nationalist forces. Recognisable by its low, cantilever wing, bulky fuselage and three-engine design, the Ju 52 began its life as a craft typically utilised by commercial airlines. Its triple BMW engines, which could generate about 700 horsepower, and modifiable cargo hold were initially utilised for military purposes in South America.

The 1932 Columbia-Peru War and the 1934 Chaco War saw the aircraft implemented in a supply and evacuation context. Nevertheless, the Luftwaffe was quick to recognise the Ju 52's potential, and in 1934, the first prototype bomber class Ju 52s were produced. In Spain, the Ju 52 was primarily assigned to the role of skirting the Republican blockade and transporting the Nationalist army to continental Spain. Later, many of the remaining Ju 52s would be converted to tactical bombing aircraft, and used in a 'terror bombing' campaign against the Republican civilian population throughout the Spanish countryside, and most notoriously in the bombing of Guernica.



“A 25-GALLON MIXTURE OF GASOLINE, GREASE AND USED ENGINE OIL WAS COMBINED WITH THE FORCE OF TWO 22-POUND EXPLOSIVES IN ORDER TO CREATE AN ANTI-PERSONNEL WEAPON”

trainees, who were severely inexperienced with aircraft and evidently prone to crashing.

The Eiserne Legion (Iron Legion), the predecessor of the Condor Legion, claimed its first victim, a Republican reconnaissance aircraft, at the hands of future ace Johannes Trautloft, on 25 August 1936. Despite the escalation of the role of German units in actual combat, the real change came at the beginning of September. The situation in Spain became 'threateningly red' with the election of Socialist Prime Minister Francisco Largo Caballero on 4 September and the arrival of Soviet advisers and military equipment six days later.

Hitler was worried about the possibility of further Soviet intervention, but also unwilling to commit a large portion of the recovering Wehrmacht to Spain without the possibility of dividends. Following the 1 October assertion of Franco as 'generalissimo', Hitler sought to trade military assistance for resources from the

Spanish mineral sector – such resources being vital to the rearmament of the Wehrmacht and Hitler's long-term goals.

On 2 October, the Rohstoffe-und-Waren-Einkaufsgesellschaft GmbH (ROWAK – Raw Materials and Goods Purchasing Company) was established with a credit of 3 million Reichsmarks and the purpose of buying up a portion of the Spanish mining industry. A month later, on 6 November 1936, 6,500 German volunteers and six bomber squadrons disembarked at Cadiz, and news spread of Germany's involvement in Spain. Such news was all but verified on 19 November, when, in a joint announcement, the Nazi and Italian fascist regimes recognised Franco's government.

The Legion takes flight

The full militarisation of the Condor Legion, including the name change, had, in actuality, began as early as 30 September 1936.

Operation Guido was coming to an end. Having transferred more than 13,500 troops, 127 light armaments and 36 field guns from Morocco to Spain, a number of the surviving Ju 52s were converted into bombers. Although the official operations of the reformed Condor Legion began on 8 November with the beginnings of the Siege of Madrid, there were several sorties beforehand, most notably the experimental direct bombing of civilians in Plaza de Colon, Madrid, on 27 October.

The month-long assault on Madrid that would begin two weeks later would see the arrival of the International Brigades on the Republican side and a three-day bombing campaign against the republican civilian population by the Condor Legion. The battle also saw the loss of air superiority by the Condor Legion in the face of a Republican side bolstered by the arrival of squadrons of the technologically superior Soviet Plikarpov I-16 fighter class and Soviet Tupolev ANT-40 bomber class. The siege ended less than a month after it began with the exhaustion of both sides and the establishment of a static front line.

Below: Orders and documents of Staff Sergeant Nicolaus Lechner, with the Tank Badge of the Condor Legion (far left)





Disappointed with the failure of the assault of Madrid, the opening months of 1937 saw the Condor Legion use its political influence to support the introduction of a campaign against the less-fortified areas of the Republican front. Additionally, the arrival of new staff, such as Wolfram von Richthofen as chief of staff, prompted a revising of technology. It was decided the Heinkel He 51 had become obsolete, and by late April a replacement was under way, with the Messerschmitt Bf109 offering a fitting replacement.

This was not an easy task, and it required a significant restructuring of the Legion itself, with fighter groups such as the Jagdgruppe 88 (J/88) experiencing a partial rotation of staff. An influx of new prototype technology was under way, with infamous names, such as the Heinkel He 111, Junkers Ju 87 and the Dornier Do 17, appearing in a military context for the first time. The old aircraft were passed on to the Nationalist Air Force, and with a mutating air force, the Condor Legion joined the War in the North.

The German forces set a precedent of violence for the Biscay Campaign on 31 March, when, to the horror of the Republic and Basque forces, the town of Durango, a defenceless settlement of little military value, was levelled. Less than a month later on 26 April, Guernica, a town housing 10,000 refugees of the War in the North, famously met the same fate.

Both attacks saw the introduction of the new aircraft, but also of 'the little man's bomb-carpet' technique, known contemporarily as 'carpet bombing'. In fact, the War in the North saw the introduction of many such innovations in the use of aircraft.

In addition to the realisation of carpet bombing's effectiveness, the 'Knickerbein' system and 'Devil's Egg' improvements were also trialled. The former was a system of bombing wherein the bombers, providing close air support, would be guided to the target by radio, effectively creating 'airborne artillery', and setting the stage for the infamous Blitzkrieg tactics employed a few years later. The latter was an innovation in incendiary bomb design. A 25-gallon mixture of gasoline, grease and used engine oil was combined with the force of two 22-pound explosives in order to create an anti-personnel weapon that hinged on the mixture's ability to produce a burning, sticky substance upon detonation.

Napalm wouldn't be invented and properly implemented in war until the bombing of Berlin by the US Army Air Force on 6 March 1944. Regardless, the system of bombing developed during the War in the North, as well as the experimental bombs themselves, would later be evaluated and applied to Nazi military strategy. By the end of the Biscay Campaign, the Condor Legion had undergone a metamorphosis.

To the south, the Nationalist line was faltering in the opening stages of the Battle of Brunete, due to an unexpected ambush of the town by the Republican forces on 6 July. The Condor Legion responded immediately with a newly equipped air force. This time, the tables had turned. The Republican Air Force was now under-equipped, and the Condor Legion was quick to assert its dominance in the skies above Brunete.

# FIGHTER ACES OF THE LEGION

SOME OF GERMANY'S DEADLIEST ACES MADE THEIR NAMES IN THE BATTLE FOR SPAIN

## WOLFRAM VON RICHTHOFEN 'THE TARTAR'

Born into nobility, Richthofen rejected an academic life and began his military career in the German Calvary in 1913, earning an Iron Cross. In 1918, Wolfram joined the Luftstreitkräfte, the Imperial Air Service of Germany, where he witnessed the death of his cousin Manfred – the legendary 'Red Baron'.

After a brief delve into academia, Richthofen joined the Condor Legion in Spain in 1936. He worked to expand Close Support Doctrine – advocating for co-operation between an equally weighted ground force and air force.

Additionally, he pioneered the 'Air Shuttle' technique, in which the sorties of aircraft would be staggered in order to allow a constant air presence. Last, upon joining the under-equipped Condor Legion, he famously improvised, utilising 88mm anti-aircraft batteries in the place of artillery. The Luftwaffe's Special Purpose Division was constructed with Richthofen's findings in mind.



## WERNER 'VATI' MÖLDERS

Born in 1913, Mölders was initially declared "unfit for flight" by the Luftwaffe in 1932, due to his severe airsickness. Through willpower, he overcame his ailment and applied once again for the Luftwaffe, this time being accepted and transferred to the Condor Legion, arriving to take over from Adolf Galland on 14 April 1938.

Despite his late arrival, he became the highest scoring ace of the Condor Legion, with 15 kills in the Spanish Civil War alone. He was, like Galland, awarded a Spanish Cross in Gold in recognition of his skill, but also of his combat pioneering.

Mölders introduced the 'Schwarm'/'Finger-Four' formation and the 'Cross Over Turn' to the Luftwaffe – both tactics would prove to be vital in securing Germany's future victories. Mölders died in a civilian aircraft crash in 1941 while attending the funeral of a superior in Crimea.

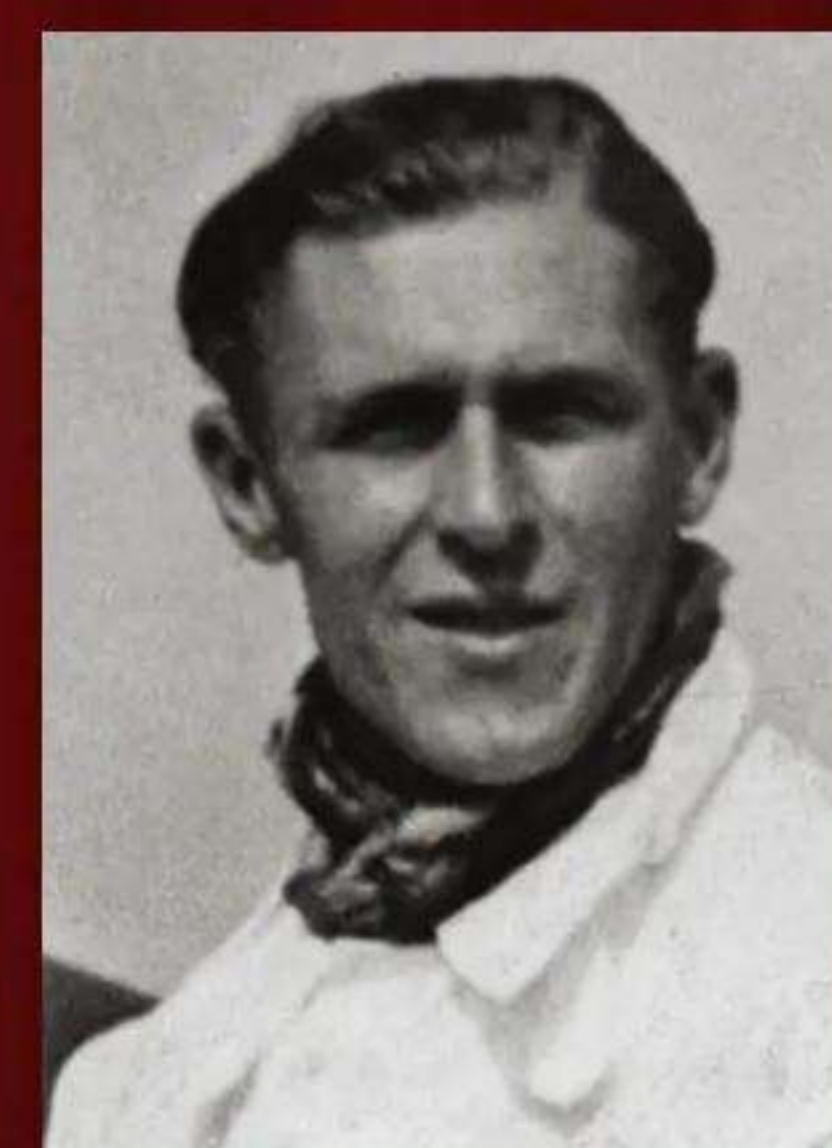


## JOHANNES 'HANNES' TRAUTLOFT

Born in 1912, Trautloft joined the covert Deutsche Verkehrsfliegerschule in 1931, and was transferred to the Condor Legion in 1934. He was among the initial six pilots, paired with Heinkel He 51s, to arrive in Spain on 7 August 1936.

As well as claiming the first recorded kill by the Condor Legion, Trautloft developed the theory behind the deployment of the new Bf109. Like Galland and Mölders, Trautloft was awarded the Spanish Cross in Gold with Diamonds.

In World War II, Trautloft famously rescued 160 Allied airmen from Buchenwald Death Camp by transferring them to a prison camp just days before their executions. He later joined the Fighter Pilots' Revolt and, following the end of the war, served in the Bundesluftwaffe – the air force of West Germany, until his death in 1995.



“THE SYSTEM OF BOMBING DEVELOPED DURING THE WAR IN THE NORTH, AS WELL AS THE EXPERIMENTAL BOMBS THEMSELVES, WOULD LATER BE EVALUATED AND APPLIED TO NAZI MILITARY STRATEGY”



## HITLER'S ELITE

The 19-day battle saw an almost oversaturation of Nationalist aircraft, and it was widely believed that the Battle of Brunete decided the war – a belief that Hermann Goering would utilise in order to gain favourable concessions from the Nazi government in the future. The protection of Nationalist Brunete was a great success, and would be repeated upon the return of the Condor Legion to the War in the North, and the decisive victory at the end of the month-long Battle of Santander.

That said, the overconfident Condor Legion – which was quickly becoming an economic burden for Nazi Germany – would face difficulty in the battles of Teruel and Belchite, but would emerge victorious. Regardless, the issues in Spain were quickly becoming overshadowed by developments in Central Europe, the Anschluss of Austria and annexation of the Sudetenland.

The bombing of Barcelona on 16 March would again see the use of military force against civilian targets, this time with the added innovations of experimental timed explosives and the 'Silent Approach' method. This technique was orchestrated by deactivating the engine in order to glide from a high altitude silently and bomb the desired target, before restarting the engine and climbing once more to a safe altitude. The timed explosive would penetrate much deeper into the buildings or streets before detonating. These were among the last experimental innovations to be implemented during the war, and they wouldn't be seen again until the London Blitz of 1940.



A Stuka dive bombs a Spanish city in 1938

The Battle of Ebro, which began on 25 July 1938 and ran for the greater part of that year, would further transform the Condor Legion and the wider crisis in Spain into a nuisance. The exhausting battle saw staff recalled, reshuffled and redeployed for the last time, with Richthofen once again taking up the position as chief of staff.

The last three months of deployment consisted of a first phase, wherein the Legion conducted a series of sorties against the Republicans in the Nationalist's final offensive. With the Munich Agreement assuring that the Republic would not receive any future aide, the

Wehrmacht high command was satisfied by the establishment of a Spain that was friendly, or at the very least neutral, to the future actions of Nazi Germany. The Condor Legion began its withdrawal in February 1939, with the last troops leaving the Iberian Peninsula by May.

The intervention by Nazi Germany in the Spanish Civil War did pay its dividends. The Nazi regime was able to innovate and invent a new kind of warfare, seize industry vital to the regrowth of the German military, and train the next generation of pilots who would excel in the crucial opening months of the next great war.

# The Bombing of Guernica

**THE MORBIDLY ICONIC BOMBING OF THE BASQUE TOWN OF GUERNICA WOULD BE ONLY TOO TELLING OF THE CHARACTER OF THE NAZIS' 'TOTAL WAR' STRATEGY**

26 April 1937 opened as any other Monday would in the Basque town of Guernica. It was market day, so the streets were packed with people from the surrounding region. Despite the civil war that was engulfing the rest of Spain to the south, Guernica saw very little conflict itself. Refugees had sought asylum in the ancient capital, but otherwise, the civil war seemed almost exterior to the town's inhabitants.

What the people of Guernica couldn't possibly anticipate was that their small settlement was positioned in such a way that was strategically important to the Nationalist forces, who were invading the northern provinces. At 4.30pm, the first German aircraft began their descent into the town.

The church bells rang and people ran for the fortifications – built following the bombing of Durango. Five minutes later, the first bomber appeared, dropped its payload and departed. Then came a second – both initial attacks aiming for the centre of the town. Only 15 minutes later, three Junkers Ju 52s arrived and began carpet bombing the city indiscriminately. This was repeated every 20 minutes until 7.45pm with a rotational force utilised. This consisted of squadrons of Junkers Ju 52s for bombing and demolition purposes, and squadrons of recently introduced Bf109 fighter planes, which took up a more anti-personnel role, allegedly attacking civilians and livestock.

The consequential number of casualties is largely disputed, and ranges from as little as 300 to as large as 1,700 civilians. Additionally, as with the bombing of Durango, the Nationalist forces initially blamed communist militants for the destruction of the city – a story that has not stood the test of time, with the modern government of Germany apologising for the actions of its predecessor in 1997. What is not disputed is the fact that the Condor Legion was experimenting with psychological warfare at the time, and that the attack shattered any notion to resist the invading Nationalists, who took control of the city by the end of the month.

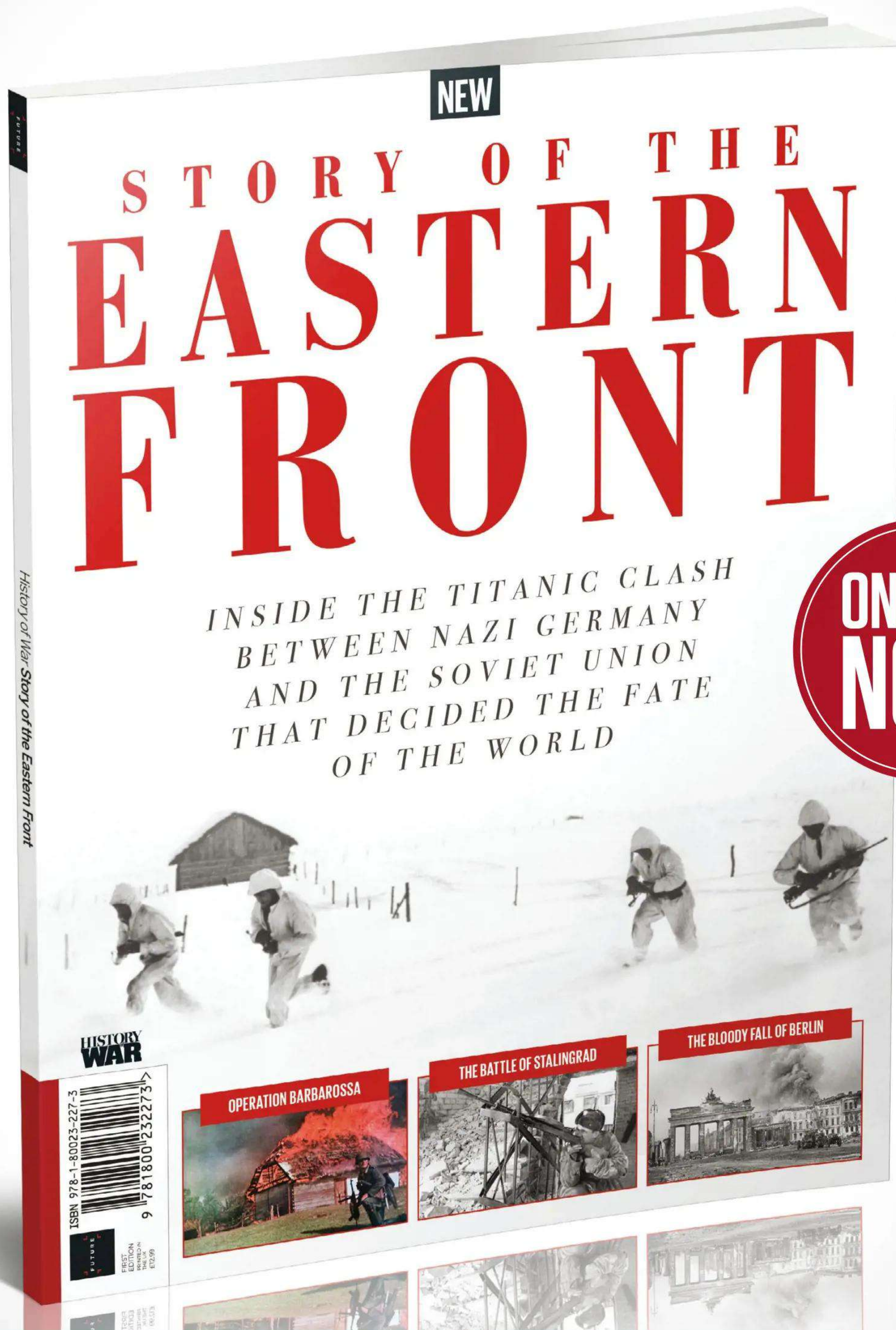
*The carpet bombing tactics employed by the Condor Legion absolutely devastated Guernica, proving the tactic to be effective and so worthy for utilisation in the future conflicts of the German state*

**“THE NATIONALIST FORCES INITIALLY BLAMED COMMUNIST MILITANTS FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CITY – A STORY THAT HAS NOT STOOD THE TEST OF TIME”**



# UNCOVER THE HORRORS OF THE BLOODIEST THEATRE IN THE HISTORY OF WARFARE

The battle for supremacy on the Eastern Front of WWII was arguably the most brutal conflict in human history, an existential struggle without mercy. From Stalingrad to Berlin, this is the story of a fight that would reshape the world



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# PANZER INVASION



David Willey, Curator of the Tank Museum, reveals the extraordinary story of how outnumbered German armoured forces successfully spearheaded the invasion of France 80 years ago

WORDS TOM GARNER



Adolf Hitler and his entourage visit the Eiffel Tower in Paris on 23 June 1940 following the occupation of France by Nazi Germany



German soldiers marching past the Arc de Triomphe after the surrender of Paris, 14 June 1940



David Willey is the curator of the Tank Museum and the host of the YouTube series 'Curator at Home'





**I**n May 1940, the world turned upside down when Nazi Germany launched a daring campaign in Western Europe against the Low Countries, and most critically, France. Then a major power with a large colonial empire, France had a huge number of armed forces at its disposal. With extensive support from the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and formidable border defences, it was entirely possible that the Germans' expansion would be stopped in the West.

Nevertheless, in a brief six-week campaign from 10 May 1940, France, Belgium and the Netherlands fell in one of the most dramatic, audacious campaigns in military history. Characterised by rapid 'blitzkrieg' warfare, the German victory was largely due to how it deployed its armoured forces.

Tanks played a vital role in this campaign, where speed and mobility counted more than armoured engagements. The fall of France in particular was a watershed moment that left Britain almost without allies and destroyed the Third French Republic. In armoured terms, the Germans had achieved this with just a few Panzer divisions, highlighting the importance of tanks like never before.

However, the famous images of Panzers rolling through the French countryside towards a seemingly inevitable victory are actually misleading. David Willey, curator of the Tank Museum, explains that Germany's armoured success in France was by no means guaranteed. He discusses how unprepared the German tank force was and why the Panzers' achievements in May 1940 set in motion the process of the Nazis' final defeat.

## Development

During the interwar period Germany conducted a series of programmes to experiment with armour. "Germany had only built 20 tanks during WWI," Willey explains. "Although the tank had not been a massive success, there was a perception in the military that it had partially influenced Germany to sue for an armistice. This had a huge psychological impact, so

the commander of the Reichswehr, Hans von Seeckt, started an investigation into why they lost and how they would do it better next time.

"The Germans performed exercises during the 1920s–30s and learned that motorised mechanisation was effective in war games. Before Hitler came to power [in January 1933] the Germans had experimented with the Russians on secret tracked vehicles and in 1933 he pushed design work forward."

The manufacture of 'Panzer' (the German word for 'tank') armoured vehicles ensued although they were not a priority for the Nazis' rearmament programme. "The Germans had major problems with their tank development. They were looking at mobile, armoured warfare but it was a tiny part of the greater German military that was forming. For example, Hitler's production priority in October 1939 was ammunition and submarines, with tanks only being about third on the list. As a WWI soldier, he envisaged the Western campaign as a slog to smash through the Maginot Line and saw artillery ammunition as the priority."

When war broke out, the Panzers were underprepared. "They built many more Panzer Is and IIs than they wanted because the Panzer III and IV were not ready. The Panzer I and II were designed to fight but they were essentially training tanks, whereas the Panzer III and IV were definitively built for combat operations." Additionally, the German doctrine for tank warfare was limited. "The tank commanders wanted to expand their Panzer divisions but the kit wasn't available. There was also the wider idea of using the tank as a support weapon for infantry attacks, which was the received wisdom in most European armies."

Despite the limitations, the success of the invasion of Poland encouraged the Germans to turn their attention west.

## The Manstein Plan

The initial plan for the invasion of France was called 'Case Yellow' and centred around an unimaginative attack with a traditional advance into Belgium, the idea being to capture as much of the Belgian and northern French coast

as possible. "It was similar to the weaker 'Schlieffen Plan' of WWI but it was unclear that it would lead to a strategic outcome. Manstein had a very different plan, and although the German High Command objected, a meeting was arranged between Manstein and Adolf Hitler. Hitler was captivated and called for a new version of 'Case Yellow'. What became known as the 'Manstein Plan' was a daring idea of speed with Panzers at the forefront.

"In the north, there were 29 divisions of Army Group B that would go into the Low Countries with three Panzer divisions. Below them was Army Group A, which was the more powerful force of 48 divisions, including seven Panzer divisions. Group B would draw the main mobile force of 60 Allied divisions into the Low Countries. Meanwhile, Group A further south would go through the relatively undefended Ardennes with the larger force and only meet 18 French and Belgian divisions."

Once Army Group A entered France, the Panzers would be critical. "Manstein argued to Hitler that those seven Panzer divisions would go through the Ardennes followed by the infantry. If they then rushed for the coast they could cut off the Allied force moving into Belgium in a massive pocket and potentially gain a strategic outcome. In other words, this was a war-winner rather than just capturing ground and perhaps a negotiated peace deal."

Although Manstein's plan met with enthusiasm from Hitler, there were reservations from within German High Command. Ironically, this disagreement aided Manstein's idea. "Hitler bought into the plan and contributed his own thoughts about the Ardennes, which is why the 1940 campaign happened in the way that it did. However, it was risky and the High Command delayed an attack in the West 29 times because they knew they were not ready. This delay worked for the German military, because by May 1940 they had assembled hundreds more tanks.

## "The tip of the spear"

Despite the audaciousness of Manstein's plan, the German army – and particularly its armoured force – was ill-prepared to invade the West.



Erich von Manstein's eponymous plan was a daring strategic masterstroke that utilised armoured speed to defeat the Allies in the West



As well as commanding German armoured forces through the Ardennes, Heinz Guderian went on to lead the 2nd Panzer Army during Operation Barbarossa



The invasion of France made the reputation of Erwin Rommel as a formidable commander. He is seen here in the aftermath of the German victory in June 1940



"When you look at the scale of the German tanks compared to the rest of the German military in 1940, it was tiny – 157 divisions were ready for the invasion but only 16 were motorised and just ten were Panzer divisions.

"The nature of the army was also striking; approximately 45 per cent of the men were over 40 years old and 50 per cent only had a few weeks training. Fuel was so short that a de-motorisation programme was enforced, with vehicles being replaced with horses before the attack. The Panzers were regarded as the tip of the spear, but many tend to ignore the less-mobile troops coming on behind."

The Germans were also outnumbered by the Allies. "There were 135 German divisions earmarked for the invasion against 151 Allied divisions, 117 of which were French. The Allies had double the artillery and 4,204 tanks compared to the Germans, who had just over 2,400." They would also have to contend with superior French armour.

"The Panzer IV's thickest armour was 30mm compared to the Char B1, which was 60mm. The Char B1 and SOMUA S35 both had 47mm guns that could penetrate 80mm armour at approximately 150 metres. The German tanks were outgunned, with the Panzer II only being able to penetrate 64mm at around 100 metres."

On the eve of the invasion the French were in a seemingly better position, but they had a different attitude towards armoured warfare.

"If you lined up the French tanks in terms of quality and numbers they were better than the Germans. The French had endured WWI, were

on the winning side and had a formula called 'Methodical Battle'. This meant preparation, simple tactics and great use of artillery. The tank was a weapon of exploitation, but artillery came first. Tanks played a small but growing part in their planning. They had also built the Maginot Line, so they had a static mentality.

"It was only very late in the 1930s that they started thinking that a mobile, armoured division was sensible. With the French, it's important to consider their mental outlook. When the campaign began they were mentally prepared for a WWI-type encounter. They saw a struggle that would run into months or years ahead, but they were preparing for the wrong war. Who could predict the shock German attack of four days breaking through and a six-week campaign compared to four years of what was effectively siege warfare? To us, with hindsight, it seems ridiculous because their strategy failed

**“THE FRENCH WERE PREPARING FOR THE WRONG WAR. WHO COULD PREDICT THE SHOCK GERMAN ATTACK AND A SIX-WEEK CAMPAIGN COMPARED TO FOUR YEARS OF WHAT WAS EFFECTIVELY SIEGE WARFARE?”**

abysmally, but for them and many others it was very sensible at the time."

### Invasion

On 10 May 1940, the Germans attacked the Netherlands and Belgium, which prompted a French-British advance into Belgium, as had been predicted by Manstein. On 12 May, the first German forces emerged from the Ardennes forest at Sedan in northeast France, with the Panzers leading the way. This was a daring success borne from logistical difficulty.

"The Panzers' conundrum was how to get through the Ardennes, which is notoriously hilly with tight roads and lethal bends. Their problems came down to, 'If one tank gets stuck, how do we fix that?'"

The breakthrough for the Germans occurred at the Second Battle of Sedan, which was fought on 12–15 May 1940. "Hitler called it a 'miracle' and the Panzers got across the River Meuse where the French defences were not that strong. French forces pulled back from the Meuse even before the tanks had actually crossed. That sense of panic engendered within the French forces caused a swift and massive collapse. The victory at Sedan released the tanks."

The Panzers' objective was to now race to the Channel ports on the northern French coast, which was an ambitious manoeuvre. "Most Panzer divisions carried up to four days' fuel and their own supplies with them. However, the logistical train was problematic. Fuel was the Panzer's lifeblood because without it a tank was just a pillbox. Heinz Guderian [commander of

*Adolf Hitler pictured in Paris with Albert Speer (left) and Arno Breker, 23 June 1940. The success of the Panzers during the invasion was assisted by his support of the Manstein Plan*





Army Group A's armoured force] sent motorcycle combinations ahead to capture petrol stations. They would also round up local Michelin maps so they knew where to go."

Key to the Panzers' speed was operating independently. "The Panzers knew their role was not to support beleaguered infantry units. They needed to be resupplied, but the novelty was that they were trying to be independent. Other units were integral, such as engineers, artillery and infantry, but the Panzers took them along. They were given licence to be untied to the coattails of the army that was advancing at foot-pace miles behind them."

This independence was suited to a favourable landscape. "Most of northern France is relatively flat compared to the Ardennes. After gathering fuel, the next important thing was to capture bridges. The Germans followed the Somme Valley at one point, and river crossings were a problem. Guderian told the troops that you didn't have to repair a bridge or perform a river assault if you managed to get there before the French. It was all about speed and momentum."

This swift advance largely prevented actual tank engagements. "There weren't that many battles because the Panzer troops were told, 'If you meet any tanks, go around them.' They were conscious that their own tanks were not of the same quality and used [their] mobility rather than firepower."

"Where they did engage with French armoured forces, such as the battles of Hannut and Stonne, the Germans didn't do well, because the French tanks were a significant fighting force. However, the French efforts were dissipated and tanks constantly moved about to potential defensive positions. The Germans instead used their speed to rush French positions and were usually successful."



*Maurice Gamelin was the first commander-in-chief of French forces before he was sacked on 19 May 1940 and replaced by Maxime Weygand*

## Guderian, Rommel and De Gaulle

Heinz Guderian and Erwin Rommel became the most famous tank commanders of the invasion. Guderian was a key Panzer commander, but Willey argues that his reputation is complicated.

"Guderian was the executioner of Manstein's plan and had great influence on the battle, but you have to take his role with a pinch of salt. Manstein was responsible for the strategy, but Guderian became a pin-up of the German military. There were other commanders who were just as prominent in terms of 1930s armour development, but it was Guderian who wrote his memoirs, in which he was a bit self-serving."

The invasion also made the reputation of Erwin Rommel, commander of 7th Panzer Division. "Like Guderian, Rommel saw the advantage of speed and mobility at ground level,

because his division were capturing everything without a fight. His tanks drove past French units who were setting up for lunch and didn't know the Germans were there. At another point, French tanks lined up waiting to refuel before forming a defensive line when the 7th Panzers turned up, completely unexpected."

Rommel's rapport with his troops also increased his popularity. "He was very hands-on with the men and kept up in his half-track and aeroplane. His constant emphasis was to keep moving because he understood Manstein's strategy. He certainly became the poster-boy for the Nazis after the campaign."

"Of course, every military force tells white lies to increase their reputation, but even without the exaggerations Rommel was an absolutely brilliant armoured general."

On the other side, French tank commanders like Charles de Gaulle of 4th Armoured Division were given little chance to succeed.

"De Gaulle was put in charge of an armoured force south of the German breakthrough. He attempted an attack as part of a larger pincer movement but it was aborted and didn't happen in the way he wanted. He had the problem of the cascading effect of failure and confusion from the French High Command. Although De Gaulle didn't come out badly, he didn't have much opportunity to shine."

## An extended tortoise

The tragedy for France was that the courage of its soldiers was not matched by their leaders. "There is a lot of nonsense about French soldiers being cowards or crass jokes that their tanks had five reverse gears. The French were really let down by their command. Where they could fight, they fought supremely bravely. You only have to go on battlefield tours to find



*German tanks enter a ruined French town, June 1940*

Getty Images, Alamy, Wiki





*Although Charles de Gaulle was given little chance to prove his worth as a tank commander he swiftly found a new role as the leader of Free French forces*



*Guderian is pictured directing armoured operations from a half-track, May 1940*



*General Walter von Reichenau inspects a Char B1, June 1940*

pillboxes around Sedan etc. They invariably have plaques that commemorate soldiers who fought until they ran out of ammunition and were killed. That lie about their [lack of] courage shouldn't be allowed."

One example of the French High Command's failure was a missed opportunity to cut off the Panzer advance. "The Panzers made it to the coast on 19 May. The northern Allied armies were now in a pocket about 200 kilometres long and 140 kilometres deep against the coast. As early as 15 May, the French Prime Minister,

Paul Reynaud, told Winston Churchill, 'We are defeated'. However, on 19 May, Churchill pointed out to the French Commander-in-Chief, Maurice Gamelin, 'The tortoise has extended its head.' In other words, the Allies could cut off the Panzer advance on the coast and cause real problems with a pincer attack."

Gamelin followed this advice but the Allied plan was internally thwarted. "Gamelin issued 'Directive Number 12' on 19 May for an Allied pinch attack. However, he was sacked that day and replaced by Maxime Weygand, who

cancelled it. Weygand then wasted three days by visiting politicians, conducting a fact-finding mission and flying into the Allied pocket to have discussions with 1st Army Group Commander Gaston Billotte. He had to fly back via a tortuous route and achieved nothing."

Billotte was killed in a car crash on 21 May while Weygand belatedly reinstated Directive Number 12 before finally cancelling it on 27 May. Willey is critical of how a potentially good idea to stop the Panzers was squandered. "The idea of a major pinching-off attack was there

## "24 hours that saved Europe"

### THE BATTLE OF ARRAS WAS A FORGOTTEN TANK ENGAGEMENT THAT INADVERTENTLY CHANGED THE COURSE OF WWII

As German forces advanced, the British-held supply base at Arras was in danger of being surrounded. On 21 May 1940, the British launched a counterattack with just 2,000 infantrymen and 74 tanks. David Willey explains.

"General Harold Franklyn was in charge when Rommel's 7th Panzer Division passed south of Arras. He was ordered by Lord Gort to cut off the German advance to give Arras breathing space. Most of the British forces were in Belgium and they couldn't risk a major rear base being cut off. Franklyn ordered an attack with his available forces. British tanks in Belgium were rushed back.

"Tanks were usually transported by train, but they had to drive back. They were worn out when they arrived on the night of 20 May below Vimy Ridge. Giffard le

Quesne Martel was put in charge with soldiers from the Durham Light Infantry, who were put in a battalion each with the 4th and 7th Royal Tank Regiments. He also had artillery and anti-tank guns to make a two-pronged attack across the 7th Panzers' line. There was no time for prior reconnaissance or even an orders group. It was very ad-hoc but it was inevitable because of the situation." Primarily using Matilda tanks, the British ran into the Germans.

"The nearby French tried to help but they accidentally fired on their allies. However, the British drove through the 7th Panzers' infantry regiment, who were behind Rommel. It caused mayhem and Rommel had to come back to regain control. He created a line of flak guns and artillery and ordered everything fired at the British." The British also startled an SS division,

"The Matildas had thick armour so the standard German anti-tank rounds bounced off. The battle really had an effect because the British got through the Panzers. They then encountered the Totenkopf SS Division, which was passing further south. The SS fled and later the Wehrmacht gleefully reported how they panicked. The initial success of the attack was a moment of elation for the British." The success didn't last.

"They then came up against better-defended German gun lines set up by Rommel and only 20 British tanks of 80 made it back. By the end of the day, as the British retreated back towards Vimy Ridge, Rommel called in the Stukas." Nevertheless, the attack sent shockwaves up the chain of command, "Rommel had radioed back saying they were attacked by hundreds of tanks and Hitler feared that they would be cut off and lose at the last moment. Ewald von Kleist called the Arras attack "a serious threat" and Hitler ordered Wilhelm Keitel to the front and halted the Panzers for 24 hours on 22 May."

Willey believes the Battle of Arras had profound implications. "It was

so strategically important that one historian described it as, '24 hours that saved Europe'. The Panzers were on target to capture the Channel ports but because of the 24-hour delay they couldn't move until midnight on 22 May. In that time, the British reinforced three ports. Boulogne and Calais fell in a few days, but Dunkirk was held until 4 June, and that of course was so significant. Because Dunkirk was held, 338,000 men were evacuated.

"That ill-planned little attack by British tanks really did save Europe. I bet none of the blokes knew the significance of their action back then. The Allies would have lost those ports overnight if the Panzers had carried on and think what Churchill would have had to do? Many speculate that he would have had to sue for some kind of peace.

In their official history of the campaign written in the 1980s, the Germans emphasised Hitler's decision to halt the Panzers. The reinforced ports, particularly Dunkirk, allowed the British to fight another day and ultimately led to success in WWII as opposed to being defeated in 1940."



*The Matilda II was first used by the 7th Royal Tank Regiment in France but became particularly associated for its service in the North Africa Campaign*



but mistakes occurred in so many different ways that it led to a wasted opportunity. This paralysis, lack of leadership and failure to understand at the top reflects the WWI thinking. Weygand thought he had time but he hadn't. It's very problematic because so many French soldiers were bravely doing exactly what they were told and getting massacred."

With Manstein's plan succeeding in trapping the Allies, the BEF took matters into its own hands. During 23–24 May, its commander, Lord Gort, decided to abandon the British role in an Anglo-French counterattack. The priority became evacuating the BEF and as many French and Belgian units as possible by sea. The resulting Operation Dynamo lifted 338,000 troops, primarily from Dunkirk. This saved the BEF but was largely regarded as a betrayal by the French. With the fall of the Channel ports, the Germans struck south from the River Somme, and despite brave resistance from the French and the remaining British forces, capitulation became inevitable. Paris was captured on 14 June, which was little more than a month after the German invasion began. Like the race to the coast, the Panzers sped across France to mop up pockets of resistance, and France surrendered on 22 June.

## "The seeds of failure"

The sudden fall of France ripped up the balance of power in Europe, with the country being divided between the Nazis and the puppet Vichy government for the next four years. In a

few weeks, the Germans had used armour and mobility to neutralise a great power and severely weakened Britain's military capability.

Panzers had played an important part, although Willey is keen to stress that the role of propaganda was just as important. "This warfare wasn't unique to the Germans, but they achieved an amazing strategic outcome in France that showed the potential of armoured forces.

"However, we have almost accepted Joseph Goebbels' propaganda that the Germans were planning this for ages and that blitzkrieg was not a gamble but a mighty force unleashed.

"Goebbels promoted that idea with lots of footage of tanks racing past with Stuka dive-bombers overhead. In the newsreels, it's very hard to see the horse-drawn units that came later. It was all shot from the front end and so, in a sense, we are repeating his propaganda if we still emphasise the 'might' of the German army. It wasn't the case, because it was how the Germans used their forces that led to the victory. It's very hard to change that old perspective."

Perhaps the most complex legacy was the contribution of Hitler to the German success. "Hitler and the High Command all had worries about letting the tanks go. They were nervous of their own success and amazed at the victory. However, there are no two ways about it – if Hitler said something, then it happened.

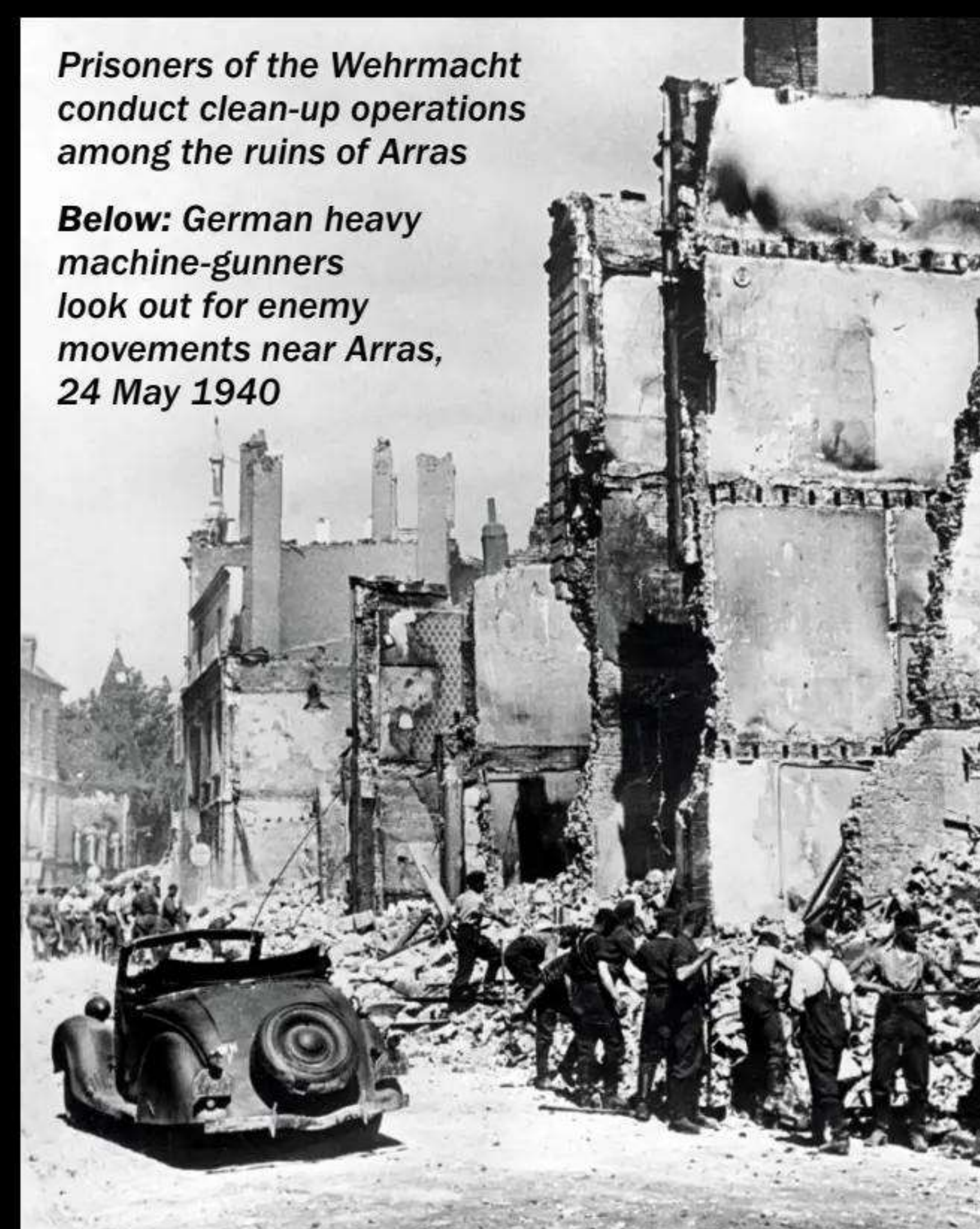
"At the outbreak of the war the German High Command thought, 'He's dropped us in it'. However, when they won in France it was very

hard to argue with Hitler because he backed the Manstein Plan against their advice. It had worked and the victory was his. It was Hitler who then demanded an 88mm gun on a tank, which led to the Tiger programme. The German military were not interested in super-heavy tanks at all – it was because Hitler ordered it. He became influential on German tank design to a degree that Churchill would never have done."

Nevertheless, Willey believes that the Panzers' achievements were also the root cause of Hitler's defeat. "The irony is that his nervousness about victory led to, what seemed at the time, minor failings. He stopped the tanks for 24 hours after Arras, which gave the British an advantage. You can step back and say that he let the British get away. This saved the BEF, strengthened Churchill's resolve and ultimately ruined Hitler's plans."

This mistake seemed minimal in 1940 but conversely, the armoured success made Hitler overconfident. "He developed an omnipotent belief in his own decisions that led to the invasion of Russia and declaring war on America. This was Hitler's megalomania, but the German military were not in a position to argue. Because they had been so successful in France they went onto the next phase by turning east with the same Panzer advances and encirclements.

"However, that lightning warfare couldn't work with Russia's geographical size. Therefore, at the height of his success in France, Hitler had introduced the little seeds of his failure."



Prisoners of the Wehrmacht conduct clean-up operations among the ruins of Arras

Below: German heavy machine-gunners look out for enemy movements near Arras, 24 May 1940



Destroyed British tanks pictured in France



# The Maginot Line

THE FRENCH BUILT A HUGE SYSTEM OF TECHNICALLY IMPREGNABLE FORTIFICATIONS ALONG THE MAJORITY OF ITS BORDERS THAT GERMAN FORCES FAMOUSLY AVOIDED

One of the most formidable military projects in history, the Maginot Line was designed to prevent a repeat of the carnage of WWI, let alone a German conquest of France. A series of concrete fortifications, obstacles and weapon installations, the Line was constructed between 1929–38 and named after André Maginot, the French Minister of War (1929–31).

Built on the French side of its borders with Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Italy, the Line was impervious to most forms of attack, including tank fire and aerial bombings. Its statistics were remarkable, with a length of 280 miles and a cost to the French Government of 3.3 billion Francs. It consisted of 142 bunkers, 352 casemates and 5,000 blockhouses. Around 1.5 million cubic metres of concrete and 150,000 tons of steel were used, and at its broadest the line was over 16 miles deep. It also contained booby traps such as

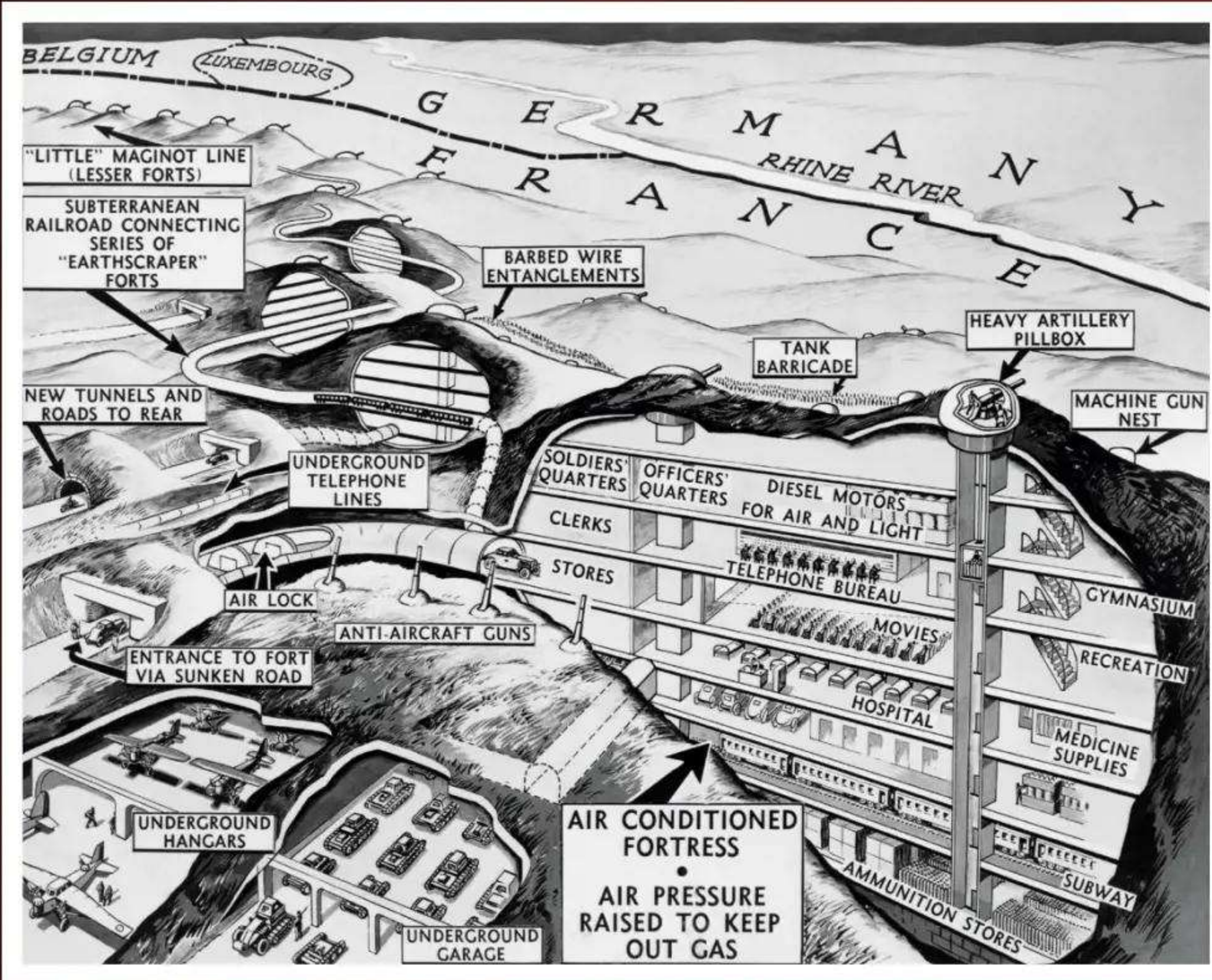
minefields, hidden gun nests, dams and levees to open in an emergency and thin rear defences so that it could be easily retaken by French forces.

The Maginot Line became the pride of France, but it did not extend along the Belgian border (particularly near the Ardennes forest) to the English Channel. This proved to be an infamous flaw when the Germans simply outflanked it in May 1940. However, in armoured terms, there was a logical reason for this, as David Willey explains.

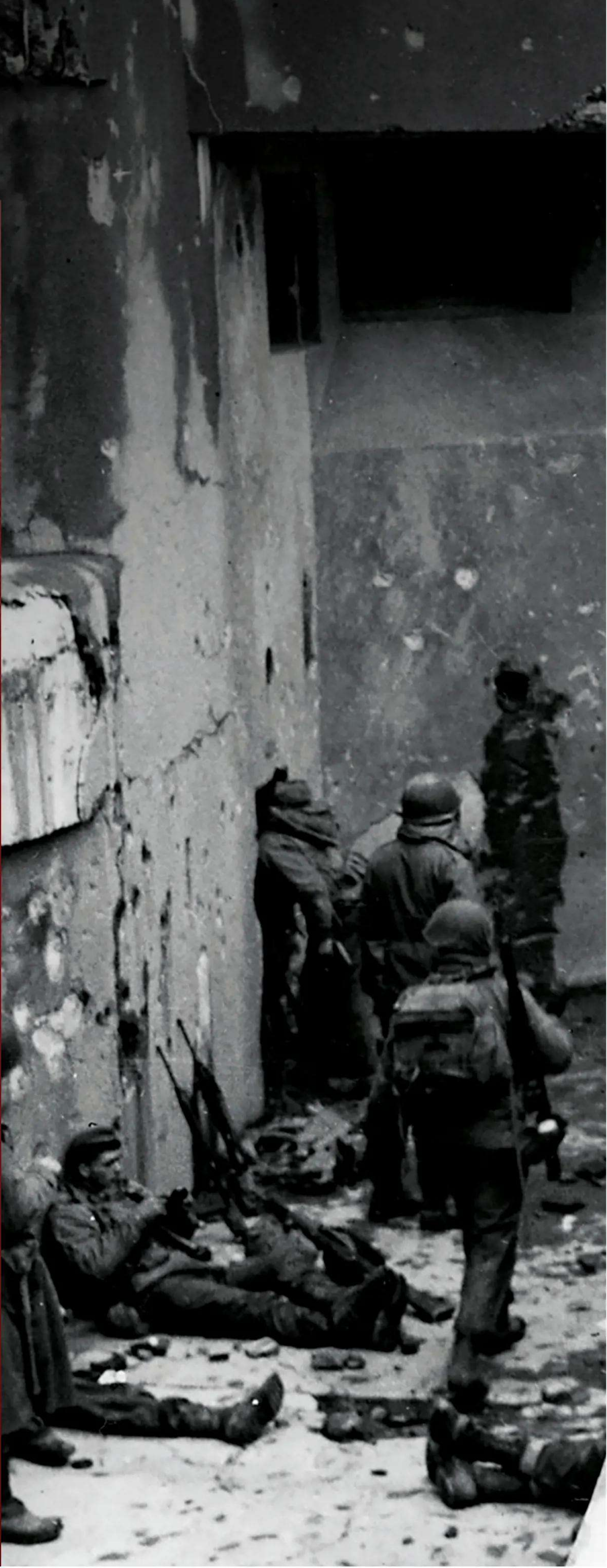
“A Panzer attack would have failed because they were not of an armoured quality that could withstand all those emplaced guns.

“Also, when you attack you want a numerical advantage, but that wouldn’t have happened if they had gone against the Maginot Line in the same way. They would have been playing into the French hands for a long-term war and that was not in their interests.”

“THE LINE WAS IMPERVIOUS TO MOST FORMS OF ATTACK, INCLUDING TANK FIRE AND AERIAL BOMBINGS”



A cartoon from 1940 of the elaborate subterranean installations within the Maginot Line. This included hospitals, telephone exchanges, elevators and underground railways







American soldiers examine Block 13, Hochwald West Fortress on the Maginot Line in 1944. The Germans had actually used the Maginot Line's defences to bombard the US 3rd Army

Getty Images, Alamy, Wiki



# PANZER II

## THE FORGOTTEN STAR OF GERMANY'S VICTORIES

Richard Cutland's operational experience in tanks includes the Gulf and Iraq wars as well as teaching armoured tactics in the British Army



Tank expert and veteran Richard Cutland discusses how this 'unsung light tank' was the most numerous and successful armoured German vehicle in May 1940

Panzers were the beating heart of Germany's battle tanks during WWII. The most famous variants were the medium Panzer III and IV tanks that have dominated perceptions of German armoured warfare. However, the most numerous German tank in May 1940 was their lighter predecessor – the Panzer II. Although it was less powerful and memorable than its successors it was still a highly successful tank.

Richard Cutland is the head of Military Relations Europe for Wargaming and served in the British Royal Tank Regiment for 30 years. He discusses the origins of the Panzer II, its importance during the invasion of France and why it has been neglected by tank historians.

### **How was the Panzer II developed?**

The Panzer I was the starting block for the Panzer II. It was initially designed as a fighting tank but, more critically, as a vehicle that could give the Germans experience of armoured

vehicles. At this stage, they were already on the Panzer III and IV. The Panzer II was developed as an interim vehicle. This had to act as an infantry-support vehicle, be proofed against small-arms fire, be able to cross battlefields and conduct independent operations. The Panzer I met these criteria, but the Panzer II was the natural progression.

### **To what extent was the Panzer II an improvement on the Panzer I?**

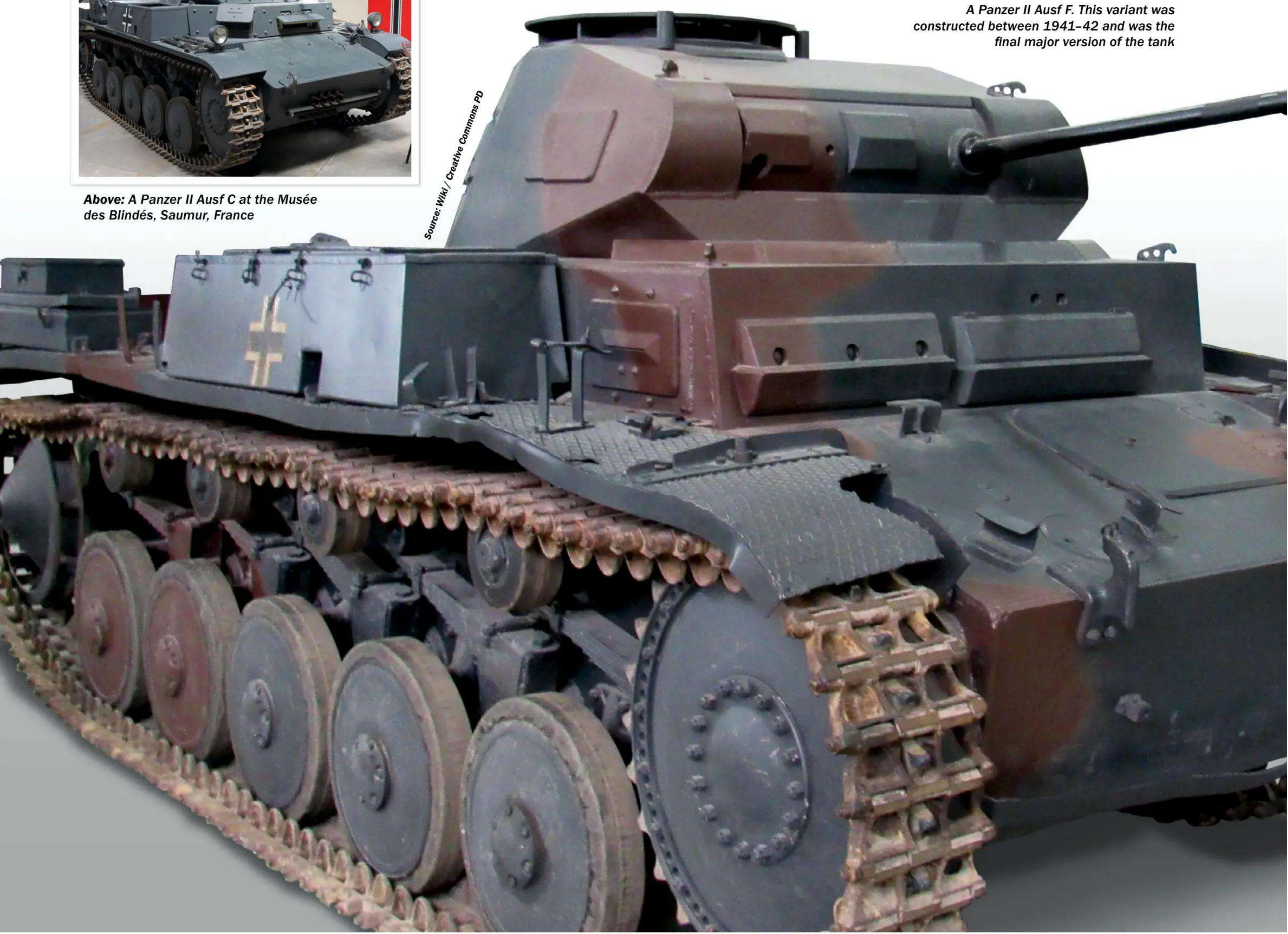
Unlike the Panzer I, the Panzer II was always



Above: A Panzer II Ausf C at the Musée des Blindés, Saumur, France

Source: Wiki / Creative Commons PD

A Panzer II Ausf F. This variant was constructed between 1941-42 and was the final major version of the tank





intended to be used in combat but not to the extent that it actually was. The Panzer I was really intended as a training vehicle and had very poor armour. The Panzer II was much larger and more heavily armoured but was still categorised as a light tank. However, it became the mainstay of the Panzer divisions for the first few years of the war.

#### **What were the Panzer II's specifications?**

It carried a 20mm KwK L/55 gun, which was basically a converted Flak 30 anti-aircraft gun, and one machine gun. It weighed about ten tons, with a top speed of around 25mph. It also had a three-man crew of a driver, commander-gunner and loader-radio operator.

#### **What were its strengths and weaknesses?**

For its strengths, the Panzer II had a low profile, which made it a small target. It was incredibly manoeuvrable and had a potent gun against lightly armoured vehicles and infantry. However, by early 1942 it was outgunned by the majority of the British and Soviet tanks. The Panzer II Ausf F had to be introduced, which was equipped with a larger gun and thicker armour. Its performance in North Africa and Russia was not particularly good, largely because its engine couldn't cope with the increased weight.

**“THE PANZER II COULD RUSH ALLIED TANKS LIKE A SWARM OF WASPS. ONE TANK MAY NOT BE PARTICULARLY STRONG, BUT IF YOU HAD 12-20 COMING TOGETHER THE PANZER II COULD WORK FORMIDABLY, WITH ITS STRENGTH LYING IN NUMBERS”**

#### **What was the Panzer II's operational history before May 1940?**

During 1936–39, production gradually increased and they were used for training. Its first real war operation came with the annexation of Czechoslovakia, but that happened almost without a fight. Its most serious operation before France was the invasion of Poland.

The Panzer II was the most numerous model in the Wehrmacht. There are differing numbers as to how many were used, but possibly 1,223 were used in Poland. The records show that it was efficient against lightly protected Polish tanks.

However, many were destroyed by Polish anti-tank rifles, and a lot were also destroyed at the Battle of Warsaw [8–28 September 1939]. The German military became concerned and recommended that the Panzer II be withdrawn as a front-line tank.

#### **How did it become the most numerous tank in**

#### **the German forces in May 1940?**

It was purely because nothing else was ready at that stage. Germany was at a blitzkrieg peak against France and the Panzer II was quickly put into service. It was a good, efficient vehicle but the problem was that it wasn't up to the tank standards of the Allies. However, the Germans used the Panzer II well because they were highly trained.

#### **Were there any notable engagements with the French during the invasion?**

It's very hard to find operational records where they purely refer to the Panzer II. This is partially because at stages there was a mix of the Panzer II, III and IV. In the heat of a campaign, I don't think anybody was too concerned between the Panzer models. Most reports just refer to 'the Panzer', of which there were many variants. The Panzer II made up 36–40 percent of the invading armoured force but would have been little or



**Above:** Adolf Hitler inspects a destroyed French tank after the campaign



Source: Wiki / Creative Commons PD

**Above, right:** The Char B1 was a powerful opponent of the Panzer II. Some captured models were used by the Germans on the Eastern Front, while others were recaptured and used by Free French and resistance forces from 1944



**A Panzer II crosses a steep slope under fire during the campaign**

Getty Images, Alamy, Wiki



*A Panzer fires at  
a French anti-tank  
position, May 1940*







A Panzer II (foreground) and Panzer I drive through woods, May 1940

“WHAT IS CLEAR ABOUT THE PANZER II IS THAT THE GERMANS WON MOST OF THEIR SIGNIFICANT VICTORIES WITH THIS GENERALLY UNSUNG LIGHT TANK”



A Panzer II Ausf C of 6th Panzer Division on display at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

no use in a clash against the British or French tanks.

However, the German plan was that their tanks would work together on the battlefield and rush the enemy. It was hard for any tank to destroy a static armoured vehicle, so they utilised their mobility. The Panzer II could rush Allied tanks like a swarm of angry wasps. One tank may not be particularly strong, but if you had 12–20 coming together the Panzer II could work formidably, with its strength lying in numbers.

#### **How did the Panzer II compare to the French Char B1?**

The Char B1 was a formidable monster of a vehicle and incredibly well powered. In May 1940, a Char B1 called ‘Eure’ deliberately drove into a German ambush and destroyed 13 tanks during the Battle of Stonne. The operational report doesn’t make it clear whether those tanks were Panzer IIs, IIIs or IVs – it could have been a mixture of all of those. Nevertheless, it emphasised how much better the Allied tanks were in terms of armament and firepower than the Panzer IIs.

There was also a drawback. The Char B1 was an amazing tank but it was expensive to build and very heavy on fuel. The logistical chain for it was so difficult that it wasn’t put into battle very often because there wasn’t enough fuel, so the French had to be very careful.

#### **To what extent did the Panzer II contribute to the German victory in France?**

It’s a combination of the slow development of the Panzer III and IV and the unexpectedly rapid expansion of Panzer forces from 1936. This meant that the Panzer II was the most important tank at the beginning of WWII. It was still the most numerous at the start of the Western offensive in May 1940. It contributed significantly to the German victory because it was the most deployed vehicle. Regardless of how useful it was it still did its job and did it very well.

#### **How much has the Panzer II’s reputation been neglected compared to its more famous successors?**

Its reputation has been completely neglected. Conversely, most of the Germans’ defeats came while using the more famous, heavier tanks, which are the ones people hear about.

The simple answer is that it was not a particularly exciting vehicle when you compare it to the likes of the Tiger tanks etc. However, it was a critical starting block for everything. It passed through the annals of tank history and development pretty much unknown but it was a great vehicle for what it was used for.



# GUDERIAN: THE MAN BEHIND THE GENERAL



Hailed as the fearless spearhead of Germany's armoured forces, Heinz Guderian's private letters home reveal a more fragile truth

WORDS DAVID STAHEL

**T**he picture of Heinz Guderian, like Erwin Rommel or Walter Model, probably evokes an image of a steely eyed man leading from the front and, almost invariably, striking a commanding pose. This is no accident. The leading panzer generals were accompanied by so-called 'propaganda companies,' who took thousands of images and framed the war around bold and dashing commanders triumphing over the enemy by guile, intellect and sheer force of personality. The published images of National Socialism's warrior leaders had to reflect this stylised man, and Guderian was uniquely skilled at performing the part, while also understanding the difference between war in reality and war in the public imagination. Yet if the stoic man with a confident smile was a front for the camera, who was the real Guderian? Who was the man behind the general?

For most German generals, questions like this would be impossible to answer, but Guderian left a trove of personal letters to his wife Margarete portraying the war, and his own struggles in it, in the starkest of terms. The contrast between the Guderian of German propaganda and the man who has appeared in our history books is not as great as one might imagine. In fact, those two men bear little resemblance to the one privately writing letters home from the front, especially in 1941 as his Panzer Group 2 unsuccessfully attempted to subdue the Soviet Union.

There is no question that Guderian was bold and brave, and in the early weeks of the invasion

of the Soviet Union it looked as though the key commanders in the East were headed for another sweeping victory followed by a new set of accolades and public rewards. On 12 July 1941 Guderian's confidence was sky-high as he believed an end to Soviet resistance was at hand, writing Margarete, "I hope to defeat

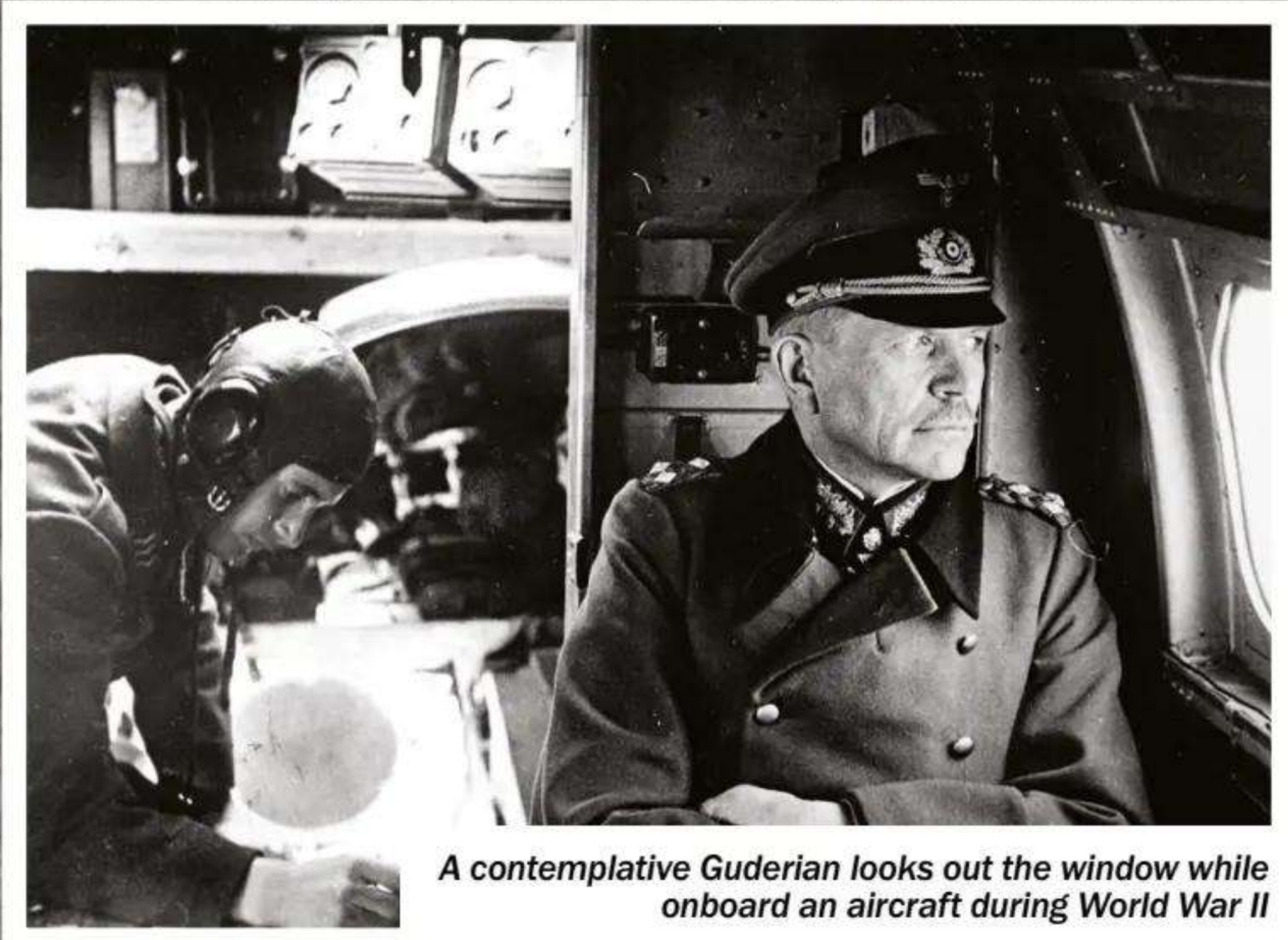
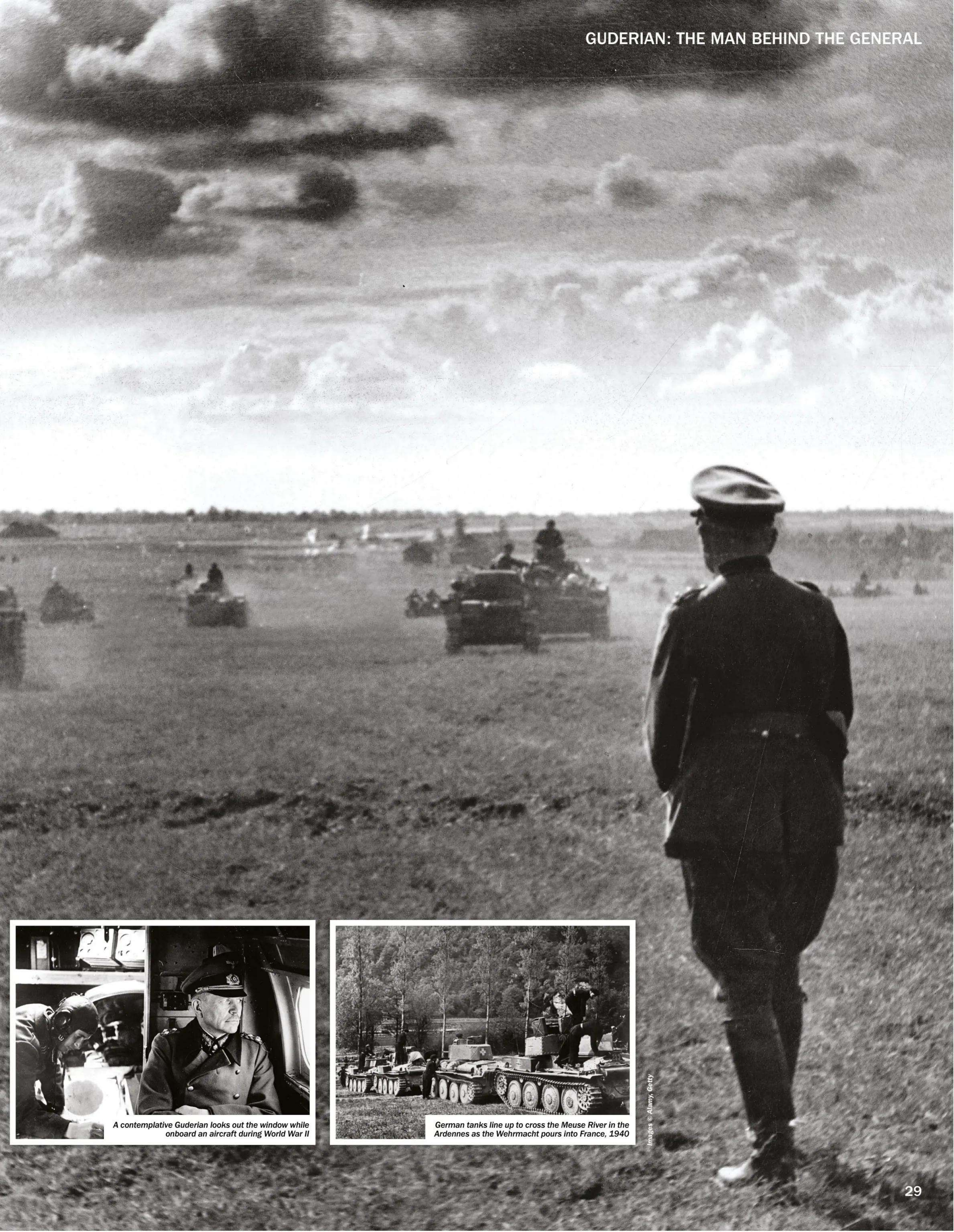


Above: Heinz Wilhelm Guderian (June 1888 - May 1954)



Adolf Hitler presents Guderian with a medal





A contemplative Guderian looks out the window while onboard an aircraft during World War II



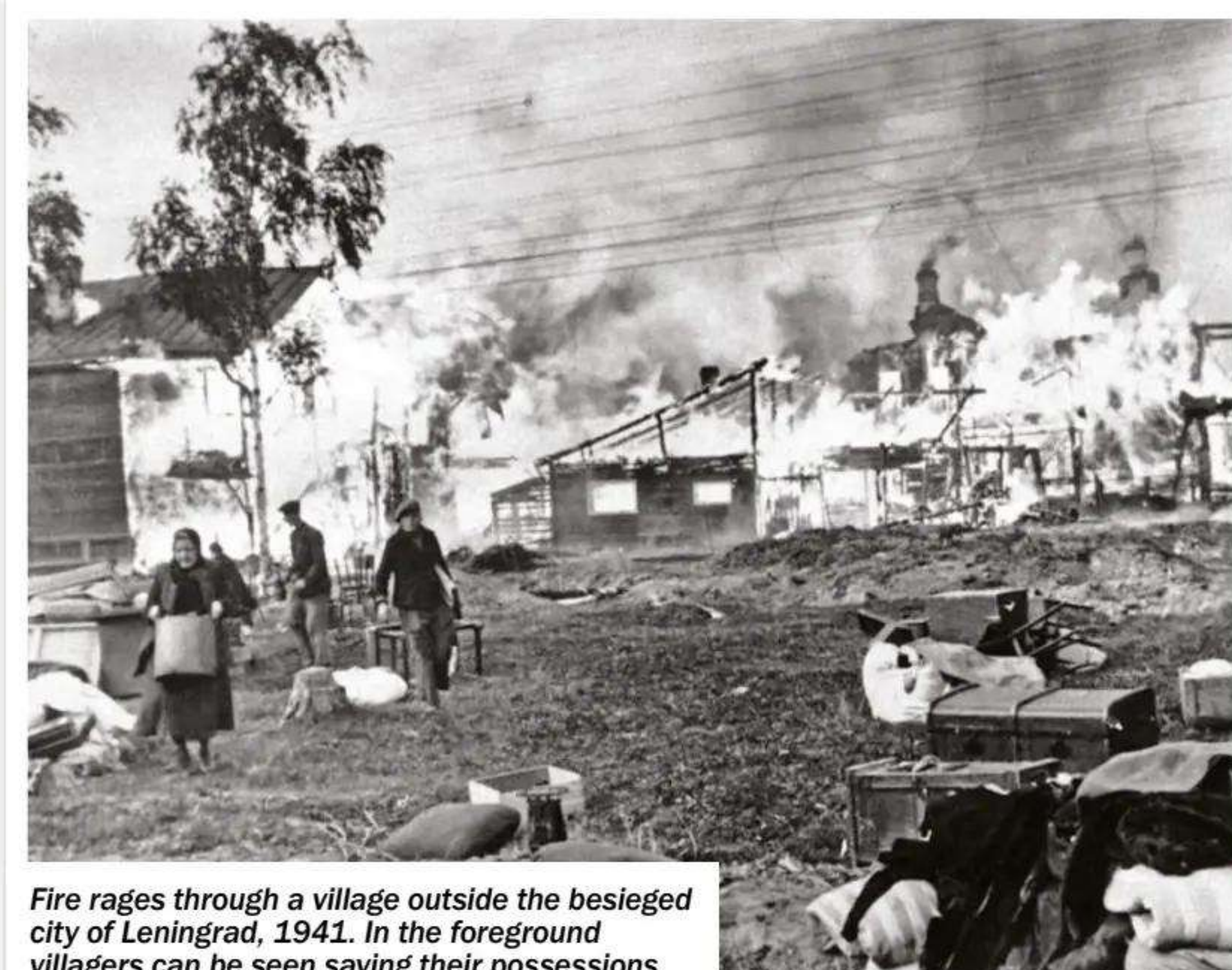
German tanks line up to cross the Meuse River in the Ardennes as the Wehrmacht pours into France, 1940

Images © Alamy, Getty





German Mark III tanks cross a river on the Eastern Front



Fire rages through a village outside the besieged city of Leningrad, 1941. In the foreground villagers can be seen saving their possessions



Field Marshal Walter Model discusses the Germans' progress in the early stages of Operation Barbarossa, 1941

them in the coming days [...] and achieve in the process a success that will decide the campaign in our favour."

On 17 July Guderian was awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross (only the twenty-fourth man in the army to receive this distinction). His beaming smile was the public face of the victories at Smolensk and Kiev with the cinema newsreel series, *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*, focusing on Guderian as the principal German commander. Yet his victories were by no means bloodless and his panzer group was suffering dramatic losses in vehicles and tanks, partly as a result of combat but mainly as a result of the vast distances it was being asked to travel on extremely poor roads. At the beginning of the campaign Guderian's panzer group numbered some 953 tanks of all models, but five weeks later, on July 29, only 286 tanks remained – a 70 per cent loss of its original strength. As the panzer group's war diary noted, "this figure is exceedingly low". More worrying still, of the remaining total only 135 tanks consisted of the modern Mark III and Mark IV designs; the other 128 tanks consisted of the obsolete Mark II.

The cost of the campaign was also measured in the enormous psychological strain it exacted on commanders like Guderian, something he revealed to Margarete in early August: "Your loving compliments on the Oak Leaves did me good, especially as the gruelling irritations are not yet over [...] I don't know how long my heart and nerves will be able to endure it. Right now,



**HIS UNCOMPROMISING ATTITUDES POLARISED OPINIONS, MAKING HIM LOVED AND HATED THROUGHOUT THE CHAIN OF COMMAND"**

I'm running on empty." Guderian concluded his letter, "My mood is fluctuating a lot; at present, I'm at a low point."

Just how much the stress of command impacted Guderian's psychological well-being was captured in another letter at the end of August when he wrote, "My health is good, but I'm otherwise unwell." In parallel to Germany's waning offensive strength, Guderian's mental health was in steep decline and his letters from the autumn and winter would reflect just how far the deterioration extended.

There is no doubt that Guderian was a strong-willed personality, but his uncompromising attitudes polarised opinions, making him both loved and hated throughout the army's chain of command. Publicly, however, he was venerated as one of Germany's most loved celebrity commanders, and even the media of foreign adversaries singled him out with a degree of respect and foreboding. Yet the war in the East rapidly wore down even the toughest men, and by 11 October he wrote to Margarete of his need to "unburden my heart to another human being". Although Guderian appears to have enjoyed positive relations among his staff, he noted, "as an older person – I am ever more isolated and the young people increasingly keep their distance. In spite of the very nice way of life in

my staff, I feel this more and more." Four days later, Guderian admitted to experiencing "many emotions" and reminiscing about "lovelier and generally carefree times". Yet Guderian was fighting the impulse for melancholy because, as he told Margarete, "I don't want to give you a heavy heart" and because he was worried about the state of his men, for whom "one must be a good example [...] and bring himself to merriment, a daily new struggle".

Shortly thereafter Guderian came down with a terrible cold, writing that it "must also be endured in good spirits". Privately, however, his letters were drifting more and more into fantasies of home life, writing at length on 21 October about his envy for Margarete's life of "peace and the contentment" and concluding, "My longing for a reunion and our happy, blissfully sweet life together becomes ever stronger." It was a stark contrast with his portrayal of life at the front: "Here there is no personal touch, no spirit, no contentment. In this country, the beauty is just as tramped down as the spirit. Everything has become a bleak, mechanic, heartless machinery, hideous and squalid, indescribably feeble. One has to have seen it to know what it's like."

Guderian's downcast outlook was not only a notable contrast from his earlier letters in





June and July but a source of growing concern for Margarete. Writing on 5 November, she observed, “Your report sounds very wistful and, unfortunately, not very hopeful and confident [...] I’m very troubled by that.”

Remarkably, on 12 November Guderian suddenly wrote to Margarete that he had tried to leave the front and return home for a visit but

was prevented by snowstorms. He said he would try again on 13 November, but this attempt would also prove unsuccessful. Granting oneself a leave of absence, however short, in the midst of operations was certainly an extraordinary liberty that, on the one hand, speaks to Guderian’s disconsolate frame of mind, but on the other it highlights the hypocrisy of generals

who expected and demanded so much more of their men. Only days before Guderian had described the morning frosts and viscous mud as “torture for the troops”, but his emerging depression had become evident in every letter. “Hopefully, I can soon adopt somewhat happier tones. Complaining does not come naturally to me. But at present it is difficult to be in good spirits.” Compounding his psychological angst, or perhaps as a physiological manifestation of his emotional state, Guderian’s health suddenly declined. In addition to a worsening of his long-standing sciatic condition, his stomach was upset and he also noted that he was suffering from “severe headaches”.

Not surprisingly, Guderian’s thoughts again turned to home and he began speculating about whether some of his divisions might be sent back to Germany for replenishment. “I don’t yet know whether I’ll stay here or receive another task; hopefully the latter.” Given that the overwhelming bulk of Germany’s armoured forces were deployed in the East and Guderian had always styled himself as the preeminent panzer leader, it was a telling admission. The sluggish progress of the campaign by the end of November and the unending hardships weighed tremendously on Guderian, and his letters of despair telegraphed his mood. On 21 November he admitted to Margarete, “Yesterday I was on the brink of despair and a bag of nerves. Today, the unexpected combat success of the brave tank divisions provided me with a new ray of hope; whether it can be sustained will become

Images © Alamy, Getty



A German soldier assaults a Soviet bunker with a flamethrower





Crouching beside a tank, a German anti-tank crew man their gun on the outskirts of a blazing Soviet village

Images © Alamy, Getty

clear over the coming days.” More and more, Margarete’s own letters were responding to her husband’s emotional state, seeking to counter his dejection and boost his waning self-esteem because she alone recognised the depths to which he was sinking.

Her letter of 27 November read, “Your last letter saddened me again, because I cannot help you in your present situation or even care for you. Your concerns for your loyal, brave men are no doubt very oppressive and can scarcely be remedied. [...] I hear from all sides that you possess the hearts of your soldiers. You can feel happy and proud of this! [...] If only I could give you the same feeling!”

When Colonel general Wolfram von Richthofen, commanding the VIII Air Corps, which provided aerial support for Guderian, visited him on 7 December, he alluded afterwards in his diary to the shattered man he encountered: “To Guderian. Very open discussion. He is only externally hard, otherwise made of jelly. I actually wanted to be consoled by him and instead had to do it myself for him! Bitter and difficult.”

No longer was Guderian’s thinly disguised depression hidden from view by the façade of a once indomitable reputation for towering self-confidence. Indeed, his state of mind mimicked the steady disintegration of his panzer forces as the casualty lists grew ever longer. Writing again

on 10 December, as the Soviet winter offensive was only just beginning, Guderian lamented, “I naturally make the greatest effort to do my duty, but it greatly aggrieves me not to be able to better remedy the hardship of the troops [...]”

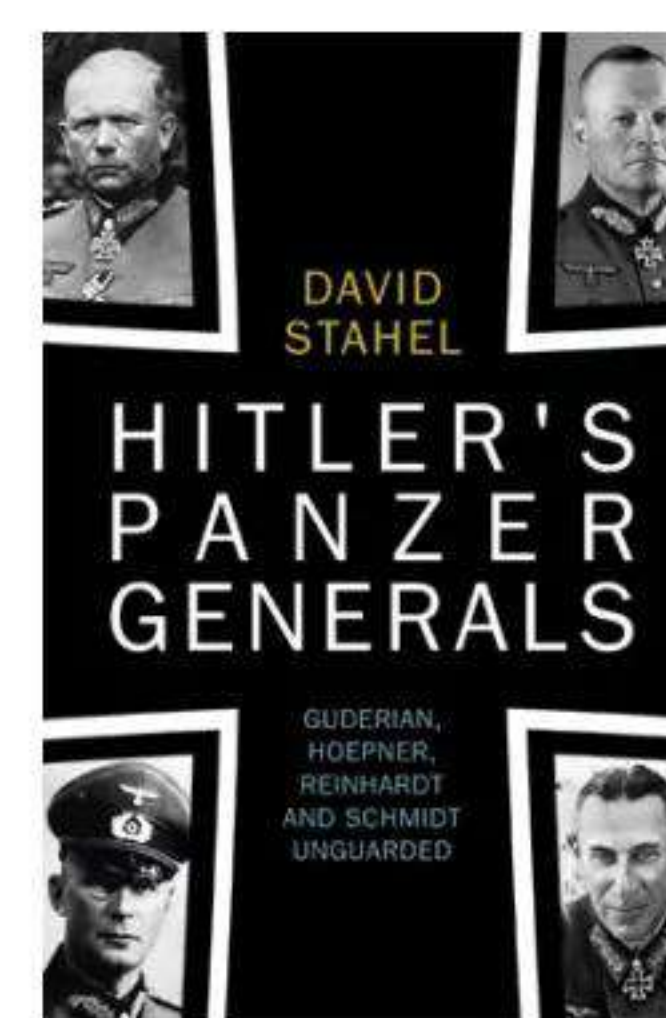
The extent of that helplessness was explained in a letter written on 16 December: “During the night I often lay sleepless and rack my brains for what else I could do to help my poor men, who must remain outside, unprotected in this winter weather. It is terrible, inconceivable. [...] The feeling of not being understood and being helplessly at the mercy of the circumstances is simply nerve-wracking.”

Finally, Guderian admitted to Margarete that he had reached an unprecedented low point: “How we are supposed to come out of this again, I don’t yet know myself. [...] I cannot recall having ever been so anxious for professional reasons as I am now and I only hope that I can endure it.” Days later, on 19 December, the commander of the Second Army, General of Panzer Troops Rudolf Schmidt, met with Guderian and observed that the once “great optimist” had reached “the end of his hopes”.

Guderian was soon dismissed from his post and sent home to Germany for repeatedly ordering unauthorised withdrawals. Without his letters informing historians about his fragile mental state, the analysis of these events

has been represented simply as Guderian’s firebrand independence and resolute rejection of higher authority. Yet it cannot be ignored that his actions directly led to his own dismissal and therefore gave him his much-desired release from the torments of command. Given his flagrant acts of insubordination, Guderian may well have been consciously or unconsciously complicit in manufacturing his own departure from the Eastern Front, thereby avoiding the shame of deserting his post at a time of crisis.

Such new insights underline the importance that private letter collections by Guderian, and other senior generals, constitute for historians. They offer an invaluable glimpse into the men who commanded Hitler’s armies, revealing how wartime propaganda and self-styled post-war memoirs often allowed corrupted images to pervade even the best histories of WWII.



**David Stahel is the Senior Lecturer in History at the University of New South Wales. His new book, *Hitler's Panzer Generals: Guderian, Hoepner, Reinhardt and Schmidt Unguarded* (Cambridge University Press), is now available to purchase.**



Guderian gazes out from his command car, a radio-equipped model of a Sd.Kfz. 251 Funk, during the battle at Baturin, September 1941

“ HE MAY HAVE BEEN COMPLICIT IN MANUFACTURING HIS DEPARTURE FROM THE FRONT, THEREBY AVOIDING THE SHAME OF ABANDONING HIS POST AT A TIME OF CRISIS ”



A German armoured column stops on a road outside of Moscow. The failure to capture the city spelled doom for Operation Barbarossa





# MYTH **vs** MACHINE TIGER

Discover the tactics, technology and battlefield record behind Germany's infamous yet iconic heavy tank

WORDS ROB SCHÄFER  
& MIKE HASKEW



Left: Rearming a Tiger I while on operations in Russia, June 1943



Left: A Panzer VI pictured on deployment in North Africa, Tunisia, 1943



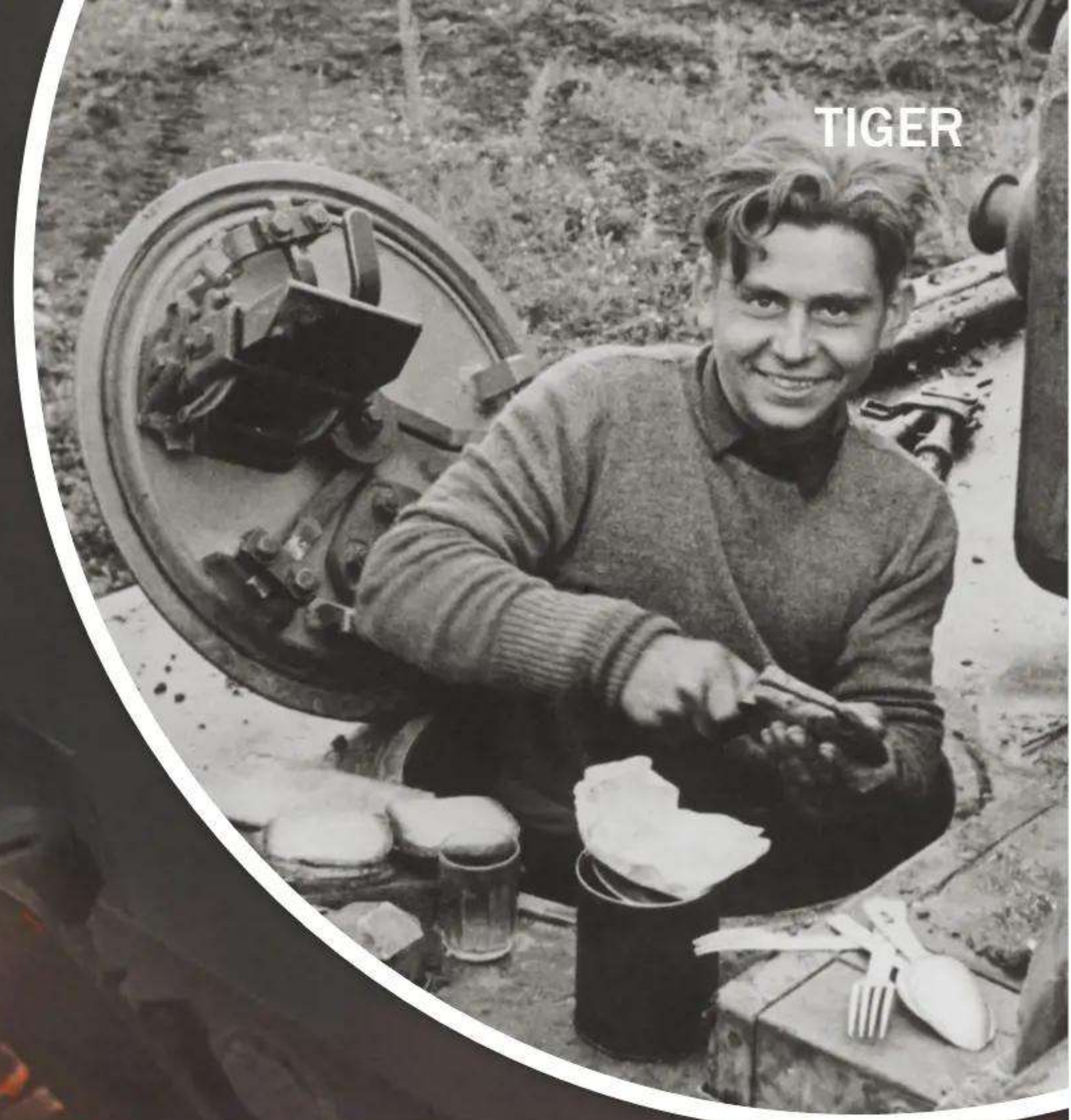
Above: Tigers drive past burning villages during an offensive in the Orel region



Left: The crew of a Panzer VI Königstiger spray their vehicle to blend with their surroundings



*Right: The radio operator of a Tiger prepares sandwiches for his crew mates, Eastern Front, August 1943*



*Artwork from mass multi-player online game World of Tanks, main sponsor of The Tiger Collection at The Tank Museum, Bovington*

**T**he Tiger – no other tank of World War II is better known. The nimbus of the infamous German heavy tank and that of its successor, the mighty King Tiger, is still unbroken and as powerful as it was 72 years ago. Today, it is still known for its fabled ‘invincibility’, for the power of its mighty 8.8cm gun and, especially in modern, revisionist historiography, for its legendary ‘unreliability’. Yet on the Eastern Front, and to a slightly lesser extent in the western theatre of war, Tiger-equipped German units performed surprisingly well.

The true story of the Tiger is hidden somewhere between those extremes, and is best told by those who used and also faced the gigantic German war machines on the battlefield.

### THE HEAVY TANK BATTALIONS

*“A concentration of the available armoured forces will always be more effective than dispersing them, irrespective of whether talking about a defensive or*

**“THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PANZERKAMPFWAGEN TIGER PROVIDED THE GERMAN ARMY WITH A MASSIVE INCREASE IN THE COMBAT POWER OF ITS PANZER FORMATIONS”**

*offensive posture, a breakthrough or an envelopment; a pursuit or a counterattack”*  
– **Generaloberst Heinz Guderian**

The introduction of the Panzerkampfwagen Tiger provided the German Army with a massive increase in the combat power of its Panzer formations. To get the most out of the new tank’s capabilities and to make full use of the propaganda advantage of creating new, elite, heavy Panzer units, the Tigers were grouped into *schwere Panzer Abteilungen* (s.Pz.Abt – heavy tanks battalions). These were independent *Heerestruppen*, held at *Armee* or *Korps* level, which could be used as heavy reinforcements to be sent to wherever their firepower was needed.

Within the German Army, the use of heavy tanks in that role was not new, and had been originally formulated by Generaloberst Walther von Brauchitsch in 1938. The German offensive campaigns in 1939 and 1940 had clearly highlighted the shortcomings of the German Panzers, yet due to the spectacular successes achieved in those early campaigns, the development of heavy tanks had not been given any priority. All that changed drastically during the first weeks of Operation Barbarossa, the campaign in Russia, when German tanks were clearly outclassed by Soviet-made T-34 and KV-1 tanks.

After a hasty development phase, the Tiger made its battlefield debut in spring 1942. It



was planned to add a heavy tank company of nine Tigers to each Panzer regiment, yet it soon became clear that the tank's mass and weight opposed its use within the ranks for regular Panzer divisions, whose tactics were heavily based on speed and mobility. The key to success was found in the concentrated use of Tigers formed into independent units. Only two 'elite' German divisions, the *Panzer-Lehr-Division* and the *Panzer Grenadier-Division 'Grossdeutschland'*, ever received organic Tiger battalions.

### TACTICS & ORGANISATION

Initially, the organisational structure of a schwere Panzer-Abteilung was based on a mixture of Tigers operating with and supported by a number of *Panzerkampfwagen III Ausf. N*. In battle, the Tigers would engage 'hard' targets such as enemy armour and fortified positions, while the lighter Panzer IIIs, armed with a short 75mm gun, would focus on 'soft targets' – enemy infantry and anti-tank guns. This form of experimental structure was known as 'Organisation D'.

Each Tiger Abteilung was equipped with three companies of nine Tigers and ten Panzer IIIs. Added to those were two Tigers operated by the battalion's command staff and five Panzer IIIs formed into a light platoon, adding up to a total of 29 Tigers and 35 Panzer IIIs. Yet due to production and supply shortcomings, the heavy battalions usually operated with only two companies summing up to 20 Tigers and 25 Panzer IIIs.

**“ IN THE LIGHT OF EXPERIENCE, IT HAD SOON BECOME CLEAR THAT THE TIGER WAS ACTUALLY AT ITS BEST IN A LONG-RANGE ENGAGEMENT OR IN A AMBUSH POSITION, PICKING OFF INCOMING ENEMY TANKS FURTHER AWAY, WITH ITS SUPERIOR GUN”**

By March 1943, combat experience had shown that the increased flexibility offered by the supporting Panzer IIIs was clearly outweighed by their heavy losses in combat, where Soviet gunners would effectively pick off the lightly armoured Panzer IIIs before turning their attention to the unsupported Tigers.

By this time, Tigers were being constructed in greater numbers, and a new organisational scheme was introduced. In this new scheme, known as 'Organisation E', the heavy tank battalions were turned into pure Tiger units, consisting of three companies of 14 Tigers each and a staff company of three Tigers.

Even though under combat conditions this nominal balance of 45 Tigers was hardly ever achieved, the new heavy battalions performing far better and drastically reduced the logistical efforts required to operate a heterogeneous mixture of tank types.

In the first months of the Tiger's operational use, very little thought was given to developing effective tactics for it, while on the other hand Tiger crew training differed little to that given to crew of German light and

medium tanks. The men of the first heavy tank Abteilungen were largely left to gather their own experiences, while higher up the chain of command, combat and experience reports were hastily gathered to speed up the development of tactics.

These experienced-based tactical directives were formulated and first put into print in the *Tiger-Fibel*, a humorous training manual, illustrated with allegorical sketches, technical drawings, photographs and cartoons in August 1943. In the light of experience, it had soon become clear that the Tiger was actually at its best in a long-range engagement or in a ambush position, picking off incoming enemy tanks further away, with its superior gun.

### TIGERS IN COMBAT

The Tiger saw its baptism of fire in September 1942 in an action south of Lake Ladoga on the northern Russian front. The outcome can only be described as a disaster. Ignoring the well-known, swampy ground conditions, all four available Tigers were sent into action. Being unable to manoeuvre properly, all four were severely



A large formation of Tiger IIs, or King Tigers, the superior successor to the Tiger I



A Tiger deployed during operations on the Eastern Front, creeping past a village in the Orel region



damaged. One of them, abandoned by its crew, could not be recovered, and later fell into Soviet hands, yet this prelude would not prevent the Tiger from proving its value on the Eastern Front.

Three months later, Tigers of s.Pz.Abt 502, again fighting at Lake Ladoga, Mishkino and Krasnyi Bor, achieved spectacular successes. Between 19 and 31 March 1943, four of the unit's Tigers (supported by three Panzer IIIs) destroyed 48 Soviet tanks without losses.

In the period between 12 January and 31 March of the same year, s.Pz.Abt 502 destroyed 160 Soviet tanks while losing only nine Tigers in the process. During this period, the unit operated in cohesion, and time was given for refit and repairs, while the German heavy tanks were not split up and were supported by a number of assault gun and tank-hunting units.

*'Tigers have to be used as battering rams in a running attack and as a bumper in the focal point of a defence. There is the danger that Tiger units receive tasks that could be fulfilled without any difficulty by regular tank companies. Constant positional changes put a massive strain on suspensions and engines while also taking up time needed for technical servicing – the damage caused by this will result in Tiger units not being available when needed'*

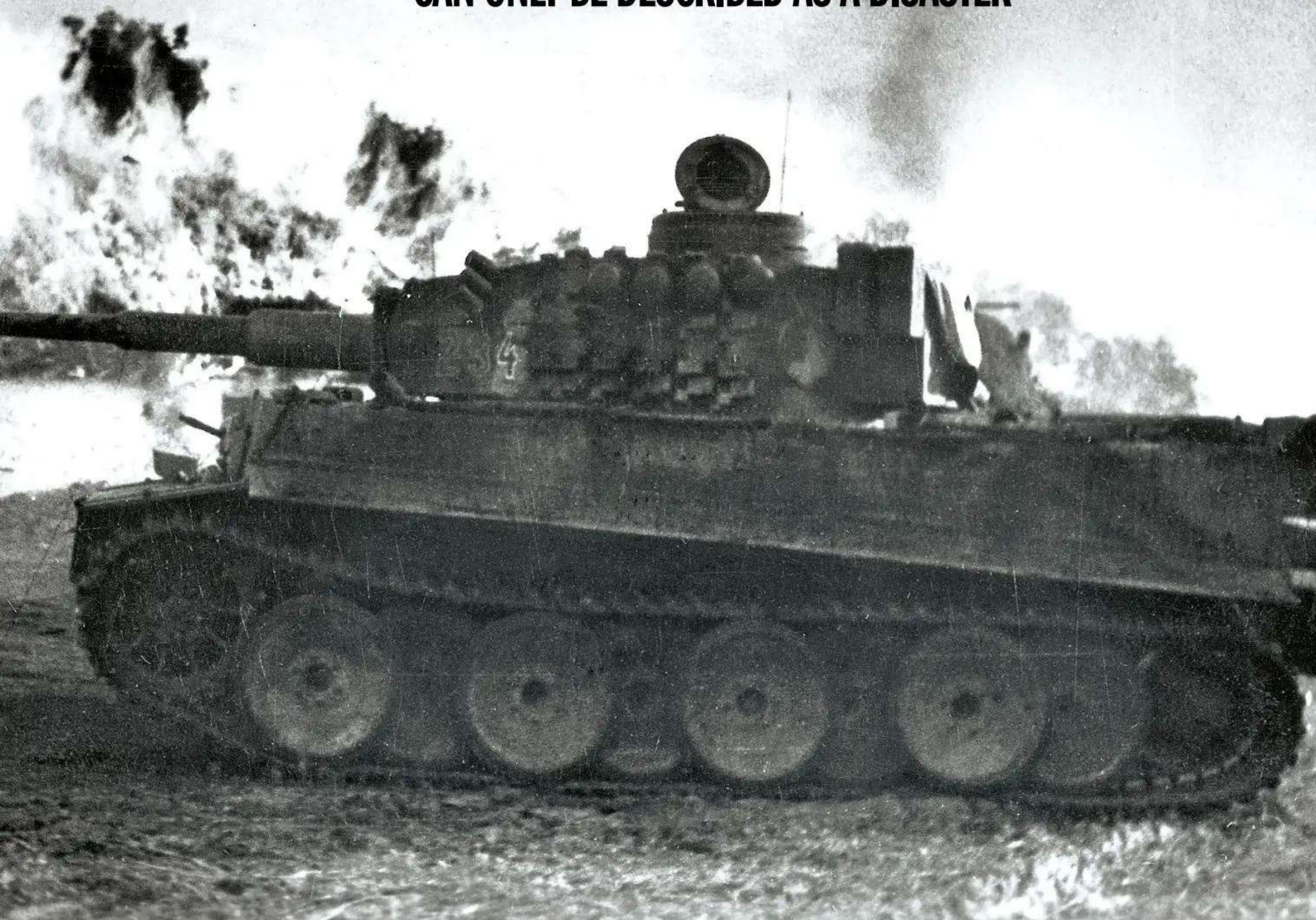
- Hauptmann Lange, CO 2./s.Pz.Abt 502, 29 January 1943

On 10 October 1943, s.Pz.Abt 503 reported the results of 78 days of continuous fighting in the area of Kursk. In total, the unit had destroyed 501 Soviet tanks, 388 anti-tank guns, 79 artillery pieces and seven aircraft. 18 Tigers had been lost in combat: six burned out after being hit by 12.2cm and 5.7cm guns, one had been taken out of action by a Soviet close-combat team using Molotov cocktails, one had been destroyed by friendly fire from a German assault gun, another had been blown up after receiving a penetrating hit in the lower hull, three had been disabled by direct artillery hits on radio operators coppola and suspension system, four had been severely damaged by penetrating hits in the suspension and tracks and had to be transported back for repair.

In stark contrast to the myth of the unreliable Tiger, only two had been lost due to technical problems – one had to be blown up after engine failure, while another was destroyed by its own crew after suffering a failure and block of the final drive system. In the whole period and under combat conditions, the unit had managed to keep an average daily combat strength of 10 to 12 Tigers available.

*"...the development of the situation in Africa requires the urgent and extra supply of modern and decisive weapons. The speedy delivery of a company of Tigers (1./s.Pz.Abt 501) has been ordered" – German High Command (OKH), Operational Section, 2. November 1942*

**THE TIGER SAW ITS BAPTISM OF FIRE IN SEPTEMBER 1942 IN AN ACTION SOUTH OF LAKE LADOGA ON THE NORTHERN RUSSIAN FRONT. THE OUTCOME CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS A DISASTER"**



# Earning stripes

THE ELITE PANZER UNITS

## WAFFEN SS



### S.SS-PANZER-ABTEILUNG 501

Formed in July 1943 around a core of troops of SS-Panzer-Division 'Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler', the unit saw service in Italy and on the Eastern Front. Assigned to the 'Hitler Youth' Division it saw service against the Western Allies in Normandy. Refitted with King Tigers from September 1944, it fought in the Battle of the Bulge before seeing final service on the Eastern Front.

**ENEMY TANKS DESTROYED: CA 500**  
**OWN LOSSES (TOTAL): 107**  
**KILL RATIO (TOTAL LOST): 4.67**



### S.SS-PANZER-ABTEILUNG 502

Formed in October 1943, it saw service in Normandy from June 1944, and was later sent to the Eastern Front in March 1945.

**ENEMY TANKS DESTROYED: CA 600**  
**OWN LOSSES (TOTAL): 76**  
**KILL RATIO (TOTAL LOST): 7.89**



### S.SS-PANZER-ABTEILUNG 503

Formed in November 1943, the crew's saw combat service as infantry in Yugoslavia until January 1944 when the unit was sent to Holland. It was attached to Heeresgruppe Weichsel and sent to the Eastern front Jan 1945.

**ENEMY TANKS DESTROYED: CA 500**  
**OWN LOSSES (TOTAL): 39**  
**KILL RATIO (TOTAL LOST): 12.82**

## WEHRMACHT HEER



### S. PANZER-ABTEILUNG 501

Formed for service in North Africa, where the first units arrived in November 1942. The unit surrendered in Tunisia in May 1943. Reformed, it was then sent to the Eastern Front in November 1943.

**ENEMY TANKS DESTROYED: CA 450**  
**OWN LOSSES (TOTAL): 120**  
**KILL RATIO (TOTAL LOST): 3.75**



### S. PANZER-ABTEILUNG 502

Formed in August 1942, the first tanks arrived at the front near Leningrad on 29 August 1942, with more tanks arriving from February 1943. It saw combat on the Eastern Front only, and was one of the most successful Tiger units created.

**ENEMY TANKS DESTROYED: CA 1,400**  
**OWN LOSSES (TOTAL): 107**  
**KILL RATIO (TOTAL LOST): 13.00**



### S. PANZER-ABTEILUNG 503

The unit saw service on the Eastern Front in southern Russia, and took part in the withdrawal from Stalingrad. It fought at Kursk, and later near Cherkassy, before being transferred to the Western Front in April 1944.

**ENEMY TANKS DESTROYED: CA 1,700**  
**OWN LOSSES (TOTAL): 252**  
**KILL RATIO (TOTAL LOST): 6.75**



# THE KING TIGER

THE TIGER TANK AND ITS VARIANTS BROUGHT FORMIDABLE FIREPOWER, INNOVATION AND NEW TACTICS TO THE EUROPEAN THEATRE IN WWII

The Tiger II, or King Tiger, was the heaviest tank deployed by any combatant during World War II. Based upon practical experience with its predecessor, the Tiger I, the King Tiger incorporated numerous innovations that were far ahead of its time. Its primary weapon, a variant of the formidable 88mm multi-purpose gun, was capable of destroying targets at distances of up to 2.4 kilometres, while its armour protection was virtually impervious to anything but a direct hit at its weakest points.

“ITS PRIMARY WEAPON, A VARIANT OF THE FORMIDABLE 88MM MULTIPURPOSE GUN, WAS CAPABLE OF DESTROYING TARGETS AT DISTANCES OF UP TO 2.4 KILOMETRES”

## MAIN ARMAMENT

The 88mm KwK 43 L/71 high velocity gun was the most powerful weapon of its kind mounted in a tank during World War II. The L/71 entered production in 1943, and was introduced with the Tiger II, or King Tiger. Its barrel length of 6.43 metres was over a metre longer than the 88mm L/56 mounted on the Tiger I, and its muzzle velocity reached an astonishing 1,000 metres per second. New armour-piercing rounds, larger than those of the L/56, were also developed. An anti-tank version of the L/71, the PaK 43, was mounted on tank destroyers or field artillery carriages.

## 88MM MAIN GUN MANTLET

## FAMILIAR INTERIOR DESIGN

The interior layout of the King Tiger borrowed significantly from the PzKpfw. V Panther medium tank design. The King Tiger accommodated a crew of five with the driver seated forward in the hull to the left and utilising a cut steering wheel, power steering, and semiautomatic gear box. Manual tillers were installed if the transmission failed. To the driver's right sat the hull machine gunner/radio operator. The large turret accommodated the massive breech of the 88mm L/71 gun, with the commander seated to the left rear, the gunner in front to the left of the breech, and the loader on the right.

## SECONDARY ARMAMENT

A pair of MG 34 machine guns, capable of a high rate of fire compared to contemporary Allied weapons, was installed for protection against enemy infantry. One was mounted coaxially in the turret, while the other was positioned frontally in a ball mount on the right side of the hull.

## ARMOUR PROTECTION

Sloped 50mm to ward off enemy shells, the frontal armour of the Tiger II was also 150mm thick. The turret glacis was armoured with 180mm of steel, and the side armour, sloped at 25 degrees, was 80mm thick. While such protection was a strong attribute, the great weight strained performance.

## TORSION BAR SUSPENSION

The Tiger II's traverse torsion bar suspension helped minimise cross-country instability. However, the nine overlapping road wheels on either side of the hull continually required maintenance due to trapped debris. In winter conditions, the wheels would sometimes freeze together, requiring the crew to remove ice before the tank could operate.

## DRIVER'S PERISCOPE WITH ROTATING CAPABILITY



**COMMANDER'S CUPOLA WITH VISION SLITS****ANTI-PERSONNEL S MINE PROJECTOR POSITION****LOADER'S HATCH FOR INGRESS AND EGRESS****HENSCHEL TURRET**

The Henschel turret of the King Tiger replaced an earlier, rounded design erroneously labelled the 'Porsche turret,' which presented a possible shot trap issue for enemy rounds that struck the vulnerable area where the turret meets the tank's welded hull. The Henschel turret is distinctively flatter and features sharper angles, helping to ward off enemy rounds and diminishing the concern for shot trap damage. Only the first 50 production King Tigers were topped with the Porsche turret. The Henschel turret also eliminated a noticeable bulge on the left side that was originally meant to support the commander's cupola position.

**COMMON POWERPLANT**

The source of numerous mechanical failures, the Maybach V-12 HL 230 P30 petrol engine was the same powerplant installed in late-war Panther medium tanks. Capable of generating 690 horsepower and a top road speed of 38 kilometres per hour, the understrength engine was the Achilles heel of the Tiger II.

**REAR FUEL TANK PORT****INTERCHANGEABLE WIDE BATTLE TRACKS****AMMUNITION CAPACITY**

The Tiger II carried a mixture of up to 80 rounds of armour-piercing and high-explosive ammunition for its 88mm gun. The rounds were stored at the rear of the turret, and along the right side of the hull, offering the easiest access for the loader during combat operations.



## HITLER'S ELITE

Between November 1942 and January 1943, 29 Tigers had been landed in Africa to equip s.Pz.Abt. 501, which first saw action in the African theatre of war in December 1942.

*"Around 3pm enemy contact was made. Weak enemy infantry forces 3 km north-west of Djedeida. He the company was met by heavy artillery fire from the heights north of Tebourba and repeated strafing attacks by enemy aircraft. Hauptmann von Nolde was killed by a artillery hit while trying to enter his tank. The attack was resumed against enemy tanks in the olive groves 5 km west of Djedeida. Thick growth of olive trees minimised fields of both vision and fire and enemy tanks had to be engaged at the closest distance (...)*

*General Lee tanks opened fire on the Tigers on ranges of 80 to 100 metres. Hits stuck in the armour but failed to penetrate (...) Two General Lee tanks were destroyed in a range of 150 metres. One Tiger lost through engine failure"*

In Northern Africa the Tigers were used along a vast and long frontline. This hampered their effectiveness, while their small number (often there were less than ten Tigers operational) limited their tactical value. Huge distances had to be covered – this and the heat of the North African desert caused a serious strain on the heavy German tanks and a severe drop of the operational readiness of s.Pz.Abt 501.

After the defeat at Stalingrad and the failure of Operation Citadel, the German Army had once and for all lost the initiative, and large-scale defensive operations were a thing of the past. On the Eastern Front, the overstretched

*A Tiger easily fording a small creek on the Eastern Front, in the summer, 1943*



*A Tiger stands ready in occupied Bozen, Italy, September 1943*

German defensive lines were faced with an enemy vastly superior in number of weapons and wealth of supplies and manpower.

In summer 1944, this critical situation reached its peak when the German Army Group centre collapsed during Operation Bagration. Along the Eastern Front, diminished German units were attempting to slow the Soviet advance with local counter attacks.

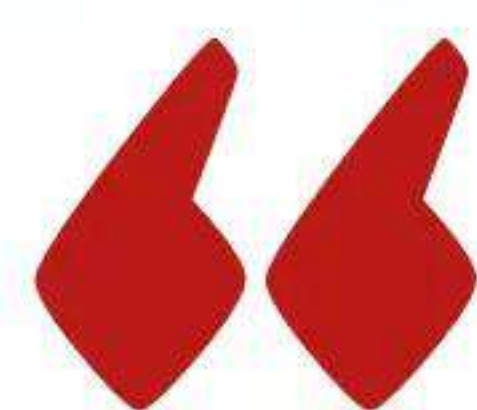
Yet even the German superiority in training and technology could only delay the Soviet march to victory. The appearance of new, heavy Soviet tanks with powerful guns like the JS-2 and the T-34/85 had changed the balance of power by reducing the range superiority of both the Tigers and the King Tigers tank guns and by outclassing most of the earlier and lighter German tank models

like the Panzer IV. Yet, even by the end of 1944, the nimbus of the Tiger still served as a weapon on its own right.

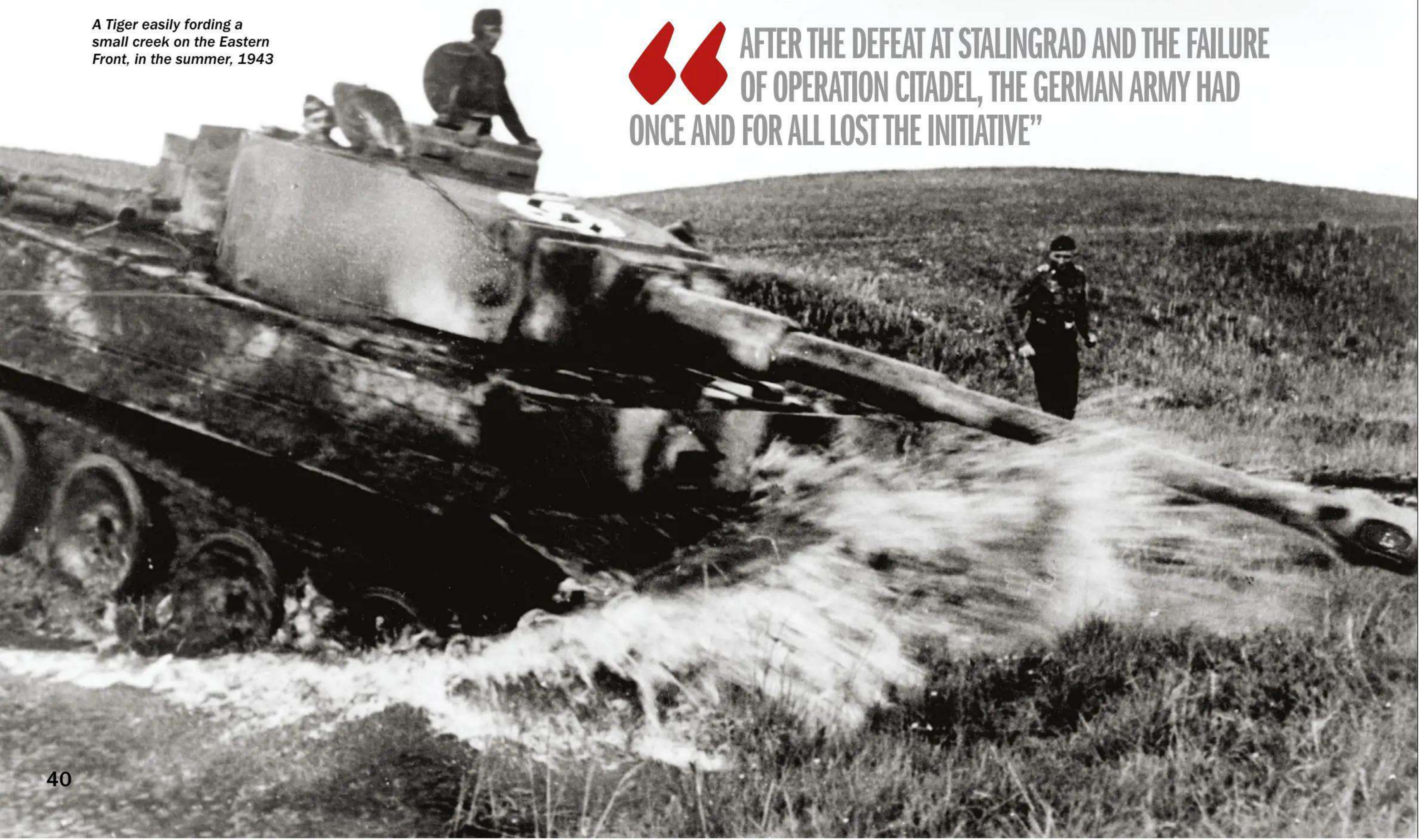
- Soon after the appearance of the 'Tigers' most 'Josef Stalins' turn around and trying to avoid a gunnery battle.
- Usually 'Josef Stalins' only engage in a gun duel on greater ranges (over 2000 m) and only when they are in a flanking position.
- Often Russian crews bail out when the first shot has been fired at them.

### **German experience report**

It was becoming increasingly difficult for the German Army to outweigh the enemy's numerical advantages by superior tactics. The strain on men and machine was terrible, and



**AFTER THE DEFEAT AT STALINGRAD AND THE FAILURE OF OPERATION CITADEL, THE GERMAN ARMY HAD ONCE AND FOR ALL LOST THE INITIATIVE"**





# The Tiger's Stripes

THE COMPETING HENSCHEL AND PORSCHE FIRMS FOUND ADDITIONAL APPLICATIONS FOR THEIR EXPERIMENTATION THAT LED TO THE INTRODUCTION OF THE TIGER



## TIGER I NUMBERS PRODUCED: 1,350

On 20 April 1942, Adolf Hitler's birthday, Henschel and Porsche unveiled prototype designs for a new heavy tank that would eventually supplant the PzKpfw. IV, the backbone of the German panzer force.

The Henschel design was chosen and named PzKpfw. VI Ausf E, later earning the fearsome nickname Tiger I.

The new 56.9 tonne behemoth had been built with the prerequisite that its 9.9 tonne turret mount an adapted version of the 88mm multipurpose gun, a proven improvised tank killer in its field artillery/antiaircraft configuration. The Tiger I became a battlefield legend but suffered from an overly complex design.



## TIGER II NUMBERS PRODUCED: 492

By 1943, the imposing Tiger II was in development as the successor to the Tiger I. Again, Henschel won the contract with the German Armaments Ministry. At 63.5 tonnes, the Tiger II was significantly heavier, and though its armour was virtually impervious to enemy fire its ponderous weight overtaxed its inadequate 12-cylinder Maybach petrol powerplant. The Tiger II was so heavy that transport of any consequential distance required the use of railroad flatcars. Although its 88mm gun was lethal at great distances, the Tiger II was never produced in numbers significant enough to alter the outcome of World War II.



## FERDINAND (ELEFANT) NUMBERS PRODUCED: 91

When Porsche's Tiger I prototype was rejected in favour of the Henschel design in 1942, the company re-purposed those chassis manufactured as experimental tanks into heavy tank destroyers. The result was the massive Ferdinand tank destroyer, named after its designer Ferdinand Porsche. Weighing 65 tonnes and introduced in 1943, the Ferdinand mounted the 88mm KwK 43 L/71 gun and carried a crew of six, including two loaders, in an enclosed hull.

Combat experience resulted in modification of 50 surviving Ferdinands in 1944. Nicknamed Elephant, these vehicles were improved with an MG 34 machine gun, anti-mine zimmerit paste, and commander's cupola.



## JAGDPANZER VI JAGDTIGER NUMBERS PRODUCED: 88

The fulfilment of an Armaments Ministry requirement that all new tank designs be accompanied by a similar tank destroyer configuration spawned the development of the Jagdpanzer VI Jagdtiger, or Hunting Tiger. The Henschel chassis was topped with a superstructure rather than a traversing turret, and the 128mm Pak 44 L/55 gun, the heaviest anti-tank weapon of World War II, was modified to fit. Both Henschel and Porsche contributed suspension systems, Henschel with nine road wheels and Porsche eight. The Jagdtiger weighed an incredible 70.6 tonnes. Like other German heavy tanks of the period, it was underpowered and mechanical breakdowns were common.



## STURMTIGER NUMBERS PRODUCED: 19

Built atop the Tiger I chassis and mounting a 380mm RW 61 rocket launcher, the Sturmtiger, or Assault Tiger, was developed in 1943 as an infantry support weapon. In theory, an urban assault vehicle had merit; however, by the time the first of only a handful of Sturmtigers was completed Germany was in retreat on two fronts. Limited ammunition capacity led to the need for an armoured ammunition carrier to accompany the Sturmtiger during deployment. Only one of these carriers was completed.

In a collaborative effort, Krupp manufactured the hulls, while Henschel added the chassis, and Alkett built the superstructure.

## HUNTING WITH THE TIGER

OTTO CARIUS DESCRIBES HIS EXPERIENCES SERVING WITH THE HEAVY PANZER

"From the start we had to cope with technical problems. We first used Tigers at Lake Ladoga, near the Volkhov. The terrain was totally unsuitable for tanks, and it was a freezing cold winter. All Tigers broke down! But things like that happen with every new technology.

"Even though it drove smoothly like a car, the most significant factor in a Tiger's and King Tiger's reliability was the capability of the driver. An experienced driver could reduce technical issues to an absolute minimum. I usually had experienced drivers but later when we switched to Jagdtigers they were a catastrophe. In the hands of an experienced crew and with regular technical servicing the Tigers were just as good and reliable as any other tank.

"As a rule of thumb one ideally had to service the tank for 10 minutes for every 60 minutes of operational use. Yet, in the later stages of the war when supplies ran low and we did not have the luxuries of trained crews and personnel anymore, that became increasingly difficult and more and more Tigers were lost. Mostly not by enemy fire. We just had to leave them behind. In general the Tiger was an excellent



weapon with which you could engage enemy armour on ranges where you did not risk to be hit yourself. I have often seen T-34s destroyed on ranges over 3,000 metres. With the long 8.8 of the King Tiger and especially the 12.8cm gun of our Jagdtigers we had the absolute superiority in firepower, although the Jagdtiger was far from being a good 'tank'.

We once had to fire through the walls of a well made house to score a hit on the IS-2 tank standing behind it. Went clean through. Tremendous firepower."

**I HAVE OFTEN SEEN  
T-34S DESTROYED ON  
RANGES OVER 3,000 METRES"**

**OTTO CARIUS  
(S.PZ.ABT. 502)**

VICTORIES: 150-200 TANKS DESTROYED



# Factory floor

## PRODUCTION ISSUES CONTRIBUTED TO THE LIMITED SUCCESS OF THE TIGER TANK, AS THE FORTUNES OF WAR TURNED AGAINST NAZI GERMANY

The German penchant for over-engineering and precision craftsmanship, disruptions due to relentless Allied bombing, excessive costs that strained a wartime economy, and chronic shortages of critical raw materials conspired to limit the production and performance of the Tiger tank and its progeny during World War II.

While the Tiger earned a reputation second to none among the legendary tanks of the 20th century, fewer than 2,000 Tiger I and Tiger II tanks were completed from 1942 through 1945. In comparison, the United States produced nearly 50,000 M4 Sherman tanks and Soviet factories manufactured more than 60,000 of the superb T-34 and T-34/85 tanks. Although the Tiger may have held a decided advantage in tank versus tank combat, the sheer weight of Allied numbers prevailed. The battle of the tanks was won on the assembly line.

Despite the innovations inherent in the Tiger I and Tiger II, including the highly effective 88mm main weapon, accurate optics for superior targeting, armour and design elements that increased survivability, power steering, and a semiautomatic transmission, the Tigers were consistently underpowered. Their Maybach engines could not deliver the horsepower to allow top cross-country speeds over 20 to 25 kilometres per hour and were prone to mechanical failure. Excessive fuel consumption limited the Tiger's range as well.

The construction of a single Tiger II required a staggering 300,000 man-hours, while the cost of a Tiger I was roughly 251,000 Reichsmarks, more than double that of a PzKpfw. IV, the workhorse of Panzer formations throughout World War II. Therefore, many analysts would deem the return on the Tiger investment as well short of break even. Compounding the challenges of production and deployment was the simple fact that the Tiger and its variants emerged too late to tip the balance of combat power in favour of the Axis.

*A factory worker welds components of the overlapping wheel system utilised in the Tiger I and Tiger II heavy tanks*



*Crewmen work on the engine of a Tiger tank in the field. This sight was quite common amid mechanical failures*



due to the lack of supplies, replacements and material the casualties of the German heavy tank units began to rise.

*"Incessant action. On 26 September not a single Tiger was operational. Everyone thinks the Tiger is invulnerable! Because of that it's wrongly used: 500 metres from front, 1,500 metres from the sides. [There are] major problems when operating with infantry. These are not assault guns! Huge strain on the assistant gunners, 9 unconscious! Only 5 towing vehicles available instead of 13. Procurement of spare parts increasingly difficult. Repair shop crews have no experience. No stock of spare parts, the electrical welding kit missing"*

**- Major Lange, s.Pz.Abt 506, 15.01.1944**

Yet all those problems aside, the unit managed to destroy 213 enemy tanks, 194 anti-tank guns within a period of three months while having an average combat strength of only 14 Tigers and while losing only two Tigers in combat. By 14 January none of the Tigers in Lange's unit was still operational. The last two Tigers had covered distances of 340 kilometres before finally breaking down. In average the other Tigers had lasted 250 kilometres – while being in constant action for the whole distance, with no time for technical servicing or repairs. No Tiger had to be left behind, none had to be destroyed by its crew.

Even in the final days of the war, small units on Tigers on the Eastern Front managed again and again to turn the tide and to delay and stop advances of far superior Soviet forces. On 19 April 1945, Soviet forces were

pressing forward to force a breakthrough to the Reichshauptstadt Berlin. Operating west of the city was s.SS-Panzer-Abteilung 503 operating the enormous King Tiger, the Panzerkampfwagen VIb. In a series of engagements that can be classed as one of the final tank battles of the Word War II, the few King Tigers of s.SS-Pz.Abt 503 proved for a last time that if used correctly and operated by experienced crews, the huge war machine was still master of the battlefield. Holding the high ground in the hilly terrain northeast of the town of Klosterdorf King Tiger 314 (SS-Unterscharführer Diers) spotted 13 Soviet T-34/85 tanks approaching his position. Within 15 minutes he had destroyed all of them.

Damaged during the engagement Diers had to withdraw, but had temporarily halted the Soviet advance. About the same time near Grunow five other King Tigers of the unit met another flood of Soviet armour with a withering hail of gunfire from their long 8.8cm guns.

When ammunition supplies began to run out, a reserve of three more King Tigers (under SS-Oberscharführer Körner) were brought forward to assist the destruction work. In total they destroyed about 105 Soviet tanks. These losses alone account for 14 per cent of the overall tank losses for the 1st Belorussian Front during the Berlin Operation. One King Tiger was lost to a barrage of Soviet Katyusha rockets. Only a short time later SS-Oberscharführer Körner, in command of a platoon of three King Tigers, was in action again during a counter attack in the area of Bollersdorf where he spotted two columns of over 30 IS-2 and over 100 T-35/85 tanks assembling for an attack. In the short engagement that followed all IS-2 tanks and a number of T-34/85s were knocked out, Körner

**“WHILE TIGER UNITS IN RUSSIA TRIED TO STEM THE SOVIET ADVANCE AND REGULARLY SUCCEEDED IN DOING SO, THE SITUATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT IN ITALY AND FRANCE WAS A LOT DIFFERENT”**





alone claiming 39 of the kills while his friend and comrade Harrer claimed a further 25.

In the late afternoon, four King Tigers defeated another Soviet tank attack, destroying a further 30 T-34s before repelling an assault by swarms of Soviet infantry. During the night, with the battlefield lit up by illumination flares, the fighting continued and more Soviet tanks were picked off by the precise and powerful guns of the Tigers. From 21 April, s.SS-Pz.Abt 503s King Tiger saw action in Berlin, breaking up various Red Army assaults within the city and destroying 15 tanks on that day alone, most of them at what can be considered point-blank ranges.

While Tiger units in the east tried to stem the Soviet advance and regularly succeeded in doing so, the situation on the Western Front in Italy and France was a lot different. American and British troops were far more capable of adapting to German tactics and strategy and were able to repel every German attack by making use of their superior numbers, supplies and, most importantly, their aerial superiority.

In the west, German armour was hardly able to move in daylight without risking destruction by the ever-present Allied *Jabos* (Jagdbomber/fighter-bomber) – the combined arms tactics developed by the Germans and so successfully used by them in 1939-41 were now being turned against them. Wherever Americans or British troops planned an attack it was prepared by intense artillery strikes and air attacks, when the Germans tried to do the same, their efforts were destroyed by the same means. In the Ardennes, the hilly terrain further exacerbated the mechanical difficulties of the King Tigers. The soft-surfaced, narrow roads were also insufficient for such large, heavy vehicles attempting to move quickly. For this

reason, both heavy tank battalions were largely ineffective during the Battle of the Bulge. Because of breakdowns, problems in supply, and the restrictive terrain, likely only a handful of Allied tanks, possibly as few as 20, were destroyed by Tiger units during the battle.

*"Of course we could take on eight or ten Sherman tanks when the situation demanded it. Yet they always had an eleventh or twelfth available. Our fighter planes were nowhere to be seen. We could only move by night. They had all the ammunition – we had none and had to choose our targets carefully. Each shot had to count. We were outnumbered, outgunned and lacked everything"*

- **Hermann Wehnmann, s.Pz.Abt 503**

**Above: A knocked-out Tiger and a dead crew member on the Eastern Front. Tigers were largely successful but could not tip the balance against huge Russian numbers**

Both the Tiger and the King Tiger, though expensive and time-consuming to produce, proved to be excellent tanks that could withstand many large-caliber hits while still remaining operational. The low number of Tigers destroyed by direct enemy action is proof of its resilience. It was, however, a very maintenance-intensive vehicle, often forcing German units to operate with only a fraction of the authorised vehicle strength. However, the handful of vehicles operational, especially in the defense and even late in the war, proved many times that they were capable of locally wreaking havoc on enemy armoured units.

**Tigers make their way across the scarred battlefield south of Lake Ladoga, September 1942. Difficult terrain made it incredibly difficult for the Tigers to operate effectively**

Images: Alamy, Mary Evans, Getty, TopFoto



Since their inception, the Fallschirmjäger were one of the most elite units in Hitler's Wehrmacht

Recolourisation: Marina Amaral

Paratroopers bring in supplies to the German positions via pack animal during the Battle of Monte Cassino, April 1944



LAST HUNT OF THE FALLSCHIRMJÄGER

# HITLER'S AIRBORNE ELITE



Fighting against the odds, the 'Green Devils' were a highly professional force responsible for pioneering WWII's early airborne operations

WORDS NICK SOLDINGER

**I**n the late 1930s, the Soviet Union was leading development of airborne tactics and conducting numerous experimental drops of paratroopers, complete with light vehicles and artillery. These inspired German observers, among them Hermann Göring, who witnessed these exercises and took home a determination to embrace the new concept. Göring, in addition to being the commander of the fledgling Luftwaffe, was in charge of the Prussian State Police. In this capacity, he commenced organising an elite group of special police to attack and annihilate perceived enemies of the state, such as communist cells.

This force, the Regiment General Göring, was eventually absorbed into the Luftwaffe in 1935 under orders to draw a group of volunteers to commence parachute jump training. In January 1936, 600 volunteers forming a Jäger battalion and a Pioneer company started training in Döberitz, while at the same time a

call for recruits for the new parachute training school in Stendal was issued – the German parachute arm, the Fallschirmtruppe had been born. In March 1938, the jump-trained men of the Göring Regiment were formally detached from their parent unit to form I/Fallschirmjäger Regiment 1 A Heer (Army) parachute unit, becoming II/FJR 1.

Finally, in 1938, Luftwaffe General Kurt Student was ordered to form 7 Flieger-Division – the world's first operational airborne division. This unit would serve as the nucleus to grow the entire German airborne forces of WWII. Kurt Student, a professional and highly decorated soldier, had been in continuous military service since 1910, serving as an infantry and naval officer in World War I before transferring to the Luftstreitkräfte where he became a successful fighter pilot. It would be his operational doctrines and leadership that would turn the Fallschirmtruppe into one of the most elite fighting forces of the war.

Training was merciless, tough and aimed to familiarise the German paratrooper with the fact that he would be facing a numerically superior foe under dire conditions. Recruits were young, often only 18 years old, and as Hitler Youth members, they had already received basic military drill and weapons training. The ideal recruit was envisaged to be 'physically strong, displaying a readiness for action and bringing with him the will and courage to bring his life into jeopardy'.

An officer of the Fallschirm-Lehr-Regiment claimed that the Fallschirmjäger had to be a Rabauke, a ruffian, always looking for a fight and relishing combat. As ruffians, they were granted liberties that were unheard of in regular army units. Drunken bar fights with German military personnel of other branches were common, whereas disciplinary measures were rather lax. Throughout the war, the paratroopers continued to enjoy all of these liberties as a kind of compensation for



continuous fighting against the odds and under terrible conditions.

Basic training lasted three months and included marching, weapons handling, use of explosives, tactics and the obligatory drill. As an Einzelkämpfer (literally 'lone fighter'), every man was expected to be able to make his own independent decisions based on the combat situation and sometimes this meant acting without orders. According to a popular dictum at the time, every man had to be able 'to take out a machine-gun position or a bunker single-handedly, even if only armed with his pistol'.

Fallschirmjäger were among the few German soldiers to be trained in individual close combat (Judo). In the third month, and only if he had proven himself in the previous two, a recruit would undergo jump training. Parachute jumps were performed from sturdy, three-engine Junkers Ju 52 transport planes at speeds of about 160-180 kilometres per hour from an average altitude of 120 metres. Jumping out of the aircraft's side door, a Gruppe of 12 men could be deployed in only seven seconds. The RZ 16 parachute would open after a free fall of about 30 meters after which the Fallschirmjäger would descend with a speed of three-five metres per second. Six training jumps, five in daylight and one by night, were needed to gain the coveted Fallschirmschützenabzeichen, the mark of a trained parachutist.

## A baptism of fire

Although it is hardly remembered today, the Green Devils, as they became known, first saw action during Fall Weiss, the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. Even though some airborne landing operations to capture vital bridges and road sections had been planned, it quickly turned out that the lightning advance of regular German ground units had rendered them unnecessary.

The first Fallschirmjäger unit to draw blood was III/FJR1 on 14 September 1939. During an operation against so-called 'stray' Polish forces in a forest near to a German airfield in the area of Suski Młynek-Jasionna, a short skirmish developed during which seven Fallschirmjäger were killed, the first in the

war, and another five men were wounded. Another notable, and this time largely successful, engagement was fought by II/FJR1 on 24 September 1939 against the remains of a Polish artillery regiment near Wola Gułowska.

Both Norway and Denmark were invaded by Germany on 9 April 1940 in Unternehmen Weserübung. Faced with the strategic necessity of crossing the Baltic and seizing widely dispersed objectives in the face of a far superior Allied naval power, it was clear that this would be opportunity for the Fallschirmtruppe to play a decisive role. Its task was to take enemy airfields and strategically important traffic junctions and bridges. This would then enable the landing of other German units and begin routing transport planes with supplies and reinforcements.

Highly successful, these operations at Oslo, Stavanger, Dombas and Narvik were the first operational airborne drops in military history.

## Corinth canal: Devils to the rescue

In October 1940, Italy launched a campaign against Greece across the Albanian border. When an Allied expeditionary force, consisting of British, Australian and New Zealand troops, landed in support of the Greeks in March 1941, Germany was forced to intervene to support its Axis ally. On 6 April, Germany launched Unternehmen Marita, the invasion of Greece. Only two weeks later, the Allied forces were in full retreat.

On 25 April, the Germans ordered an airborne operation with the primary aim to seize a bridge spanning the Corinth Canal. Linking the Aegean and Ionian Seas, this bridge would be the primary escape route for the retreating Allied forces, so capturing the bridge would be cutting off the Allied line of retreat while securing Germany's own way across the Isthmus. On 26 April, a small advance detachment of paratroopers of FJR 2 under command of Leutnant Hans Teusen landed near the bridge, overcame the British defenders and began to remove the demolition charges they had placed.

“ACCORDING TO A POPULAR DICTUM AT THE TIME, EVERY MAN HAD TO BE ABLE ‘TO TAKE OUT A MACHINE-GUN POSITION OR A BUNKER SINGLE-HANDEDLY, EVEN IF ONLY ARMED WITH HIS PISTOL’”

Fallschirmjäger were not issued with a regular army helmet, instead wearing one designed to reduce head and neck injury upon landing

Right, from top: A paratrooper stands with an LMG during the Battle of Monte Cassino

Three troopers provide covering fire during the Allied invasion of Italy, 1943

A Fallschirmjäger uses a lull in the fighting to enjoy a smoking break  
With a camouflaged helmet to help conceal him, this trooper takes aim with his FG42, France 1944

Oberleutnant Horst Kerfin photographed after the capture of Willems Bridge in Rotterdam







*Fallschirmjäger hitch a ride on a heavy Tiger I tank, Northern Front, winter 1942-43*



## HITLER'S AIRBORNE ELITE

*Hauptmann Gerhart Schirmer, CO of II/FJR2 at Grafenwöhr, after the regiment's return from Crete, June 1941*



*Soldiers are sworn into the Regiment General Göring, a precursor to the Fallschirmjäger*



Fate struck when either the British set off their charges or a projectile hit one of those charges during an enemy counter-attack, causing a massive detonation that destroyed the bridge and caused severe casualties within the ranks of Teusen's men. Two battalions of FJR 2 landing only moments later forced the British on the south of the bridge to retreat and captured 10,000 Greek and British soldiers north of it. German total losses were 62 killed and 174 wounded.

### Unternehmen Merkur: A jump into hell

The island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea served as a basis for Allied bombers threatening the oil refineries in Romania, a fact that caused Hitler to ignore the advice of the OKH (German High Command), which was already planning the invasion of the Soviet Union and strongly opposed a strike against the island. Backed by the Luftwaffe, Hitler decreed that an airborne operation should be launched in May 1941.

On 20 May, a staggering 13,000 German airborne (Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment, FJR1, FJR 2 and FJR 3) and 9,000 mountain troops divided into three groups and, arriving in two waves, were landed by parachute,

glider transport plane and by sea. As soon as the initial aerial transports zoomed over the island and the first men made their jumps, it became clear that something had gone terribly wrong. Not only had the defenders been alerted by the preliminary German aerial bombardment but they also had ample time to prepare for the German assault.

Unknown to the Germans, British intelligence had broken the German ULTRA code in July 1941 and had since then been routinely reading German radio intercepts. More than 40,000 British, Commonwealth and Greek troops were ready to give the Germans a rather unpleasant welcome. Hundreds of Fallschirmjäger were killed by Allied small arms fire before they even touched the ground, while others were dropped over sea and drowned after their transports had been pushed off course by the heavy defensive fire. The second wave didn't fare much better. After a delayed start, the planes did not arrive in one large wave but in small groups and individual, single aircraft. At sea, the Royal Navy made short work of the fleet of

requisitioned Greek boats that had been tasked to land mountain troops of the 5 Gebirgsjäger-Division on the island.

Even though some objectives were taken, the attackers had to fight for every inch of ground. Initially outnumbered and not only facing regular troops but also a civilian population armed and willing to fight, the casualties began to rise.

On Crete, an old problem of the Fallschirmtruppe became a death sentence for many a young paratrooper. The RZ 16 parachute and its harness construction necessitated a rather athletic forward roll upon landing. To avoid physical harm a man could only carry his pistol some grenades and the occasional submachine gun on his person while long or heavy weapons and ammunition had to be dropped in special containers. In the chaos and slaughter during drops, some soldiers landed far from these containers, forcing them to rely on minimal defensive weaponry.

Despite being outnumbered and suffering heavy casualties, including many senior officers, German flexibility, training and

“AS SOON AS THE INITIAL AERIAL TRANSPORTS ZOOMED OVER THE ISLAND AND THE FIRST MEN MADE THEIR JUMPS, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT SOMETHING HAD GONE TERRIBLY WRONG”



Men of assault group Koch relaxing after the capture of Fort Eben-Emael



A young paratrooper of II/FJR2



Fallschirmjäger on the Eastern Front in snow camouflage posing with newly awarded Iron Crosses. Often only the ribbon of the Iron Cross 2nd Class was worn and the medals were sent home

A young paratrooper pictured on the Italian front, 1943





*These officers were awarded the Knight's Cross for their role in the capture of the Belgian fort of Eben-Emael*

## Fall Gelb: Kicking in the door

IN A LEGENDARY FEAT, 82 MEN OF THE FALLSCHIRMTRUPPE CAPTURED THE LARGEST FORTRESS IN THE WORLD: EBEN-EMAEL

For the forthcoming invasion of Belgium and Holland, the Fallschirmtruppe was tasked with capturing a series of fortifications along the Belgian border, several strategically important bridges, as well as neutralising the Dutch government in The Hague. One of the Fallschirmtruppe's designated targets was the gigantic fortress of Eben-Emael in Belgium. Constructed between 1931 and 1935 on the Belgian-Dutch border close to the Albert Canal, it was the largest and most powerful fortress in the world at its time. Bristling with gun turrets and casemates, and sporting an underground tunnel system with a total length of more than five kilometres, it covered an area of nearly 1.5 square km, dwarfing even the largest defensive structures of the French Maginot Line.

The task to take the giant fortification and three nearby bridges was assigned to a specially formed

unit named Sturmabteilung Koch (Assault Group Koch) under command of Hauptmann Walter Koch. This consisted of 427 men and 11 officers of FJR 1 and a glider group. They were split into four assault groups: Gruppe Eisen (Leutnant Martin Schächter), Gruppe Beton (Leutnant Gerhard Schacht) and Gruppe Stahl (Oberleutnant Gustav Altmann) were ordered to take the bridges at Cannes, Vroenhoven and Veldwezelt, while Gruppe Granit (Leutnant Rudolf Witzig) was tasked to take Eben-Emael itself – with only 82 men landing in 11 gliders.

At 5.20 am on 10 May 1940, Witzig's gliders touched down right on the roof of the fort and the Fallschirmjäger, armed with hollow charges, explosives and flamethrowers, charged into action. Within 10 minutes, and amidst heavy defensive fire, the men of Gruppe Granit knocked out 14 guns and seven casemates.

The fighting above and below ground, in tunnels and casemates continued until the morning hours of the following day when German reinforcements arrived and the Belgian defenders surrendered. 82 men had captured the world's largest fortress. About 60 defenders had been killed and more than 1,000 taken prisoner. Six men from Gruppe Granit were killed, while another 30 were wounded.

In Holland, the paratroopers fared equally well, taking key airfields and bridges from determined Dutch defenders. In Rotterdam, 50 men commanded by Oberleutnant Horst Kerfin and under orders to take Willems Bridge, landed inside the Feyenoord stadium before commandeering a tram with which they continued the journey towards their objective. Bridges at Dordrecht and Moerdijk were captured and held against stiff resistance for two days until the arrival of German armoured columns.

The paratroopers' actions during the campaign in the west had earned them a legendary, even mythical, reputation that they would carry for the rest of the war. Morale was at an all time high, they were the cream of the elite and felt invincible.



**THE PARATROOPERS' ACTIONS DURING THE CAMPAIGN IN THE WEST HAD EARNED THEM A LEGENDARY, EVEN MYTHICAL REPUTATION"**

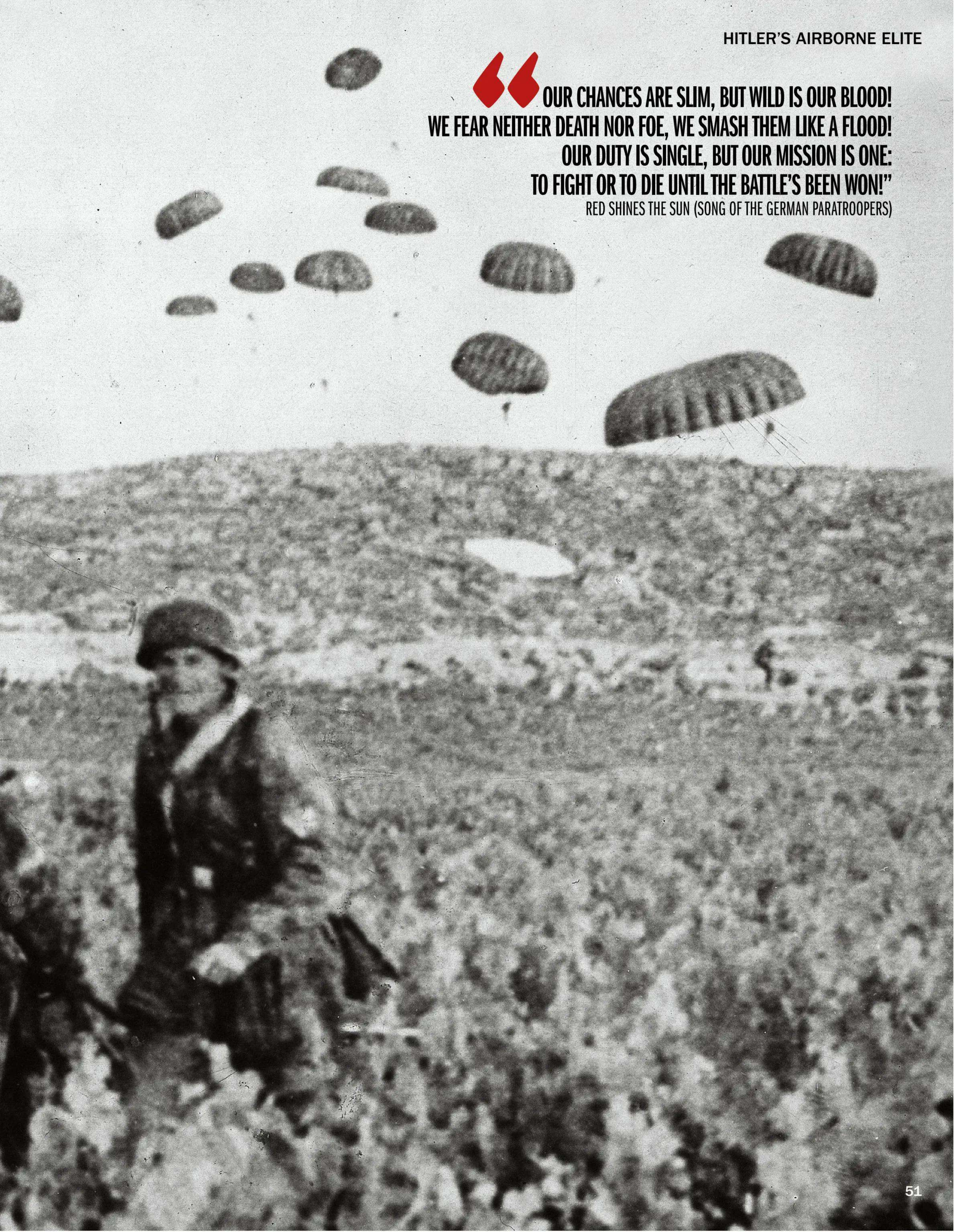




Paratroopers dropping  
in during the Invasion  
of Crete in 1941



**“OUR CHANCES ARE SLIM, BUT WILD IS OUR BLOOD!  
WE FEAR NEITHER DEATH NOR FOE, WE SMASH THEM LIKE A FLOOD!  
OUR DUTY IS SINGLE, BUT OUR MISSION IS ONE:  
TO FIGHT OR TO DIE UNTIL THE BATTLE'S BEEN WON!”**  
RED SHINES THE SUN (SONG OF THE GERMAN PARATROOPERS)





# The Devil's Armoury

AMONG THE MOST HEAVILY ARMED TROOPS, AIRBORNE UNITS RELIED ON AUTOMATIC WEAPONS TO SURVIVE BEHIND ENEMY LINES

As they were expected to face a numerically superior foe in hostile territory, Fallschirmjäger units were always heavily armed, relying on the firepower of automatic weapons to equalise the difference in numbers.

On paper, the typical Fallschirm infantry section was not only larger than that of the regular army (at least 12 men instead of the usual ten to make up for possible casualties suffered during

the parachute drop), it was also more heavily armed. In action, a section would carry two light machine guns instead of the usual one, giving it a tremendous firepower – this already formidable arsenal was supplemented by one or two submachine guns while the rest carried a bolt-action rifle. Only a couple of years later, the number of submachine guns was further increased. All of this was supplemented by a selection of

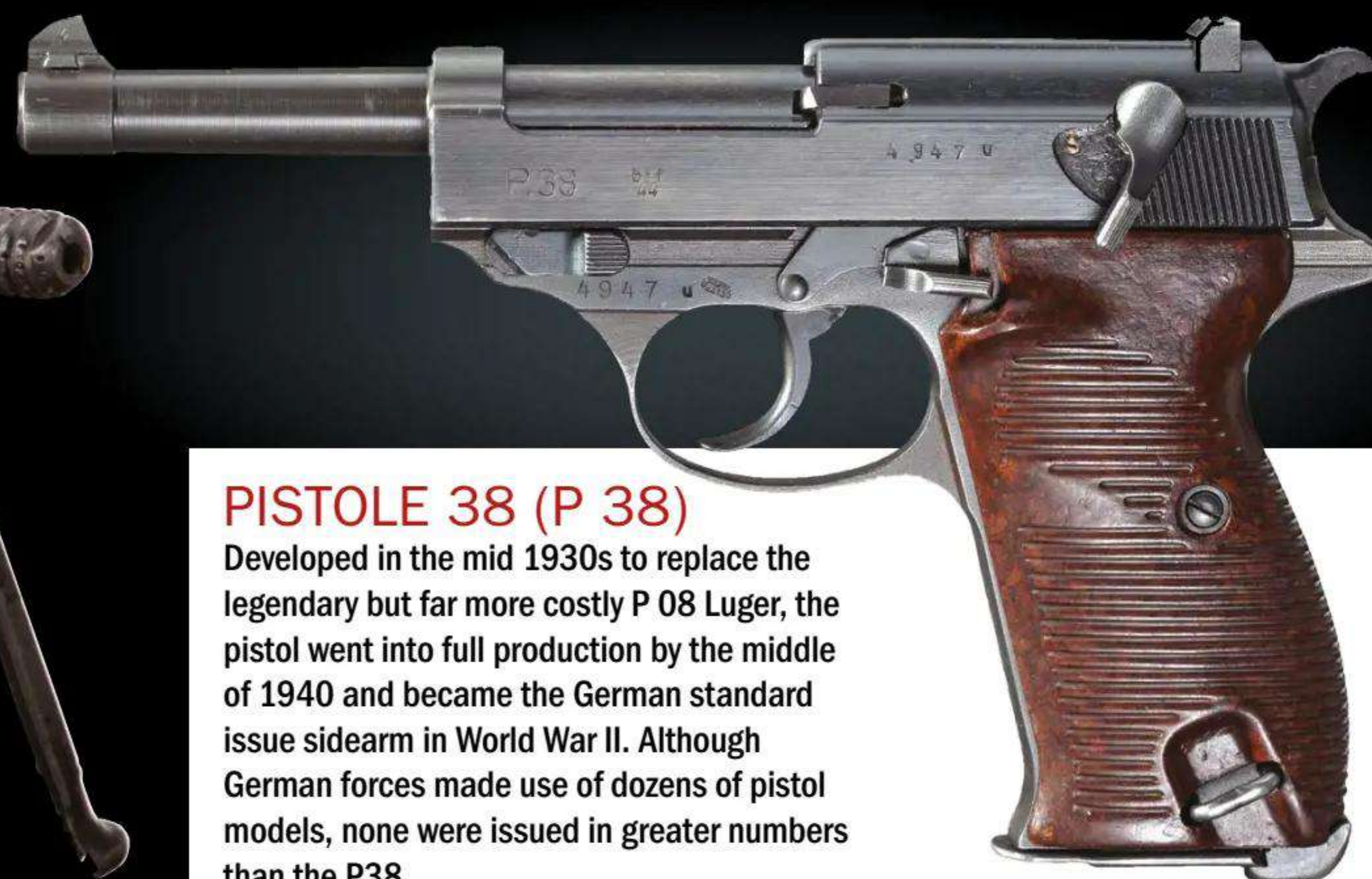
Nahkampfmittel (grenades and explosives) and handheld anti tank weapons.

Another difference from regular German infantry was that every Fallschirmjäger carried a pistol. Along with the Gebirgsjäger (mountain troops), airborne units were among the first to employ lightweight anti-tank and recoilless artillery pieces. In action, troops used a plethora of weapons, some of which are displayed here.



## FALLSCHIRMJÄGERGEWEHR 42 (FG 42)

Highly advanced and especially designed for the Fallschirmtruppe, the FG42 was a gas-operated semi-automatic rifle of which only about 10,000 were made. Being able to fire in full and semi-automatic mode, the gun had a small bipod and was fed from a 20-round magazine on the left side. It fired the powerful German 8x57 IS cartridge, which made recoil heavy and the gun difficult to control when fired in full-auto. It sported a flip-up front post and folding rear diopter sight and could be mounted with a ZFG 42 or ZF 4 scope if the situation demanded it.



## PISTOLE 38 (P 38)

Developed in the mid 1930s to replace the legendary but far more costly P 08 Luger, the pistol went into full production by the middle of 1940 and became the German standard issue sidearm in World War II. Although German forces made use of dozens of pistol models, none were issued in greater numbers than the P38.



## STURMGEWehr 44 (STG 44)

Also known as the MP44, the StG 44 was first issued in larger numbers to the veteran 1 Infanterie-Division on the Eastern Front in January 1944. Often considered the world's first true assault rifle, its design used a new shorter cartridge, which permitted controllable automatic fire. Offering greatly increased firepower, the StG 44 was highly successful and nearly 500,000 were produced. Its weight and the fact that the long, curved magazine made firing from a prone position a difficult and dangerous task wasn't much appreciated by its users, yet the highly increased firepower compensated for these flaws. Fallschirmjäger began receiving the first mentionable deliveries of StG 44s shortly before the Battle of the Bulge in 1944.



## MASCHINENGEWehr 34/42

The MG 34 and MG 42 were among the most effective light machine-guns of World War II. The MG 42 was designed to replace the MG 34 because it was much easier and cheaper to produce, being made extensively from stamped steel parts and offered a drastically increased rate of fire with a phenomenal 1,500 rounds per minute. Firing the standard German 8x57 IS rifle cartridge, both guns could be mounted on a tripod, which turned them into effective and stable heavy machine guns. Both models played an important role in German defensive tactics up until the end of the war. Within the German Army, the MG 42 received a number of nicknames, such as Hitlersäge (Hitler's saw), Knochensäge (bone saw) and Hitlersense (Hitler's scythe).

**OFTEN CONSIDERED THE WORLD'S FIRST TRUE ASSAULT RIFLE, ITS DESIGN USED A NEW SHORTER CARTRIDGE, WHICH PERMITTED CONTROLLABLE AUTOMATIC FIRE"**



## KARABINER 98K

The standard long arm of all German military personnel throughout the war was the bolt-action Karabiner 98k. One of the most reliable, accurate and well-made service rifles at the time, it was chambered to fire the powerful 8x57 IS cartridge from a five round clip. Lethal on ranges over 1.5 kilometres, it formed the backbone of the Fallschirmjäger armoury.



leadership slowly began to tell; the attackers began taking their objectives before fanning out to destroy enemy defensive positions across the island. Having secured the airfields, reinforcements and supplies were flown in and by 27 May, the defenders were demoralised and in full retreat, the town and airfield of Heraklion were taken by the Germans.

This was a victory and one that would define the fate of the Fallschirmtruppe. More than 2,000 paratroopers had been killed in action while a staggering 1,700 were missing and another 2,000 wounded. The Allies had 3,500 men killed and wounded while 17,500 men had been taken prisoner. In addition, the mission was marred by several atrocities committed by German paratroopers – several hundred Cretan civilians were massacred in reprisals for alleged attacks against German troops.

Although Kurt Student had hoped that the success on Crete would lead to even larger and more daring airborne operations, Hitler was so shocked by the losses that he decided the element of surprise had been lost. Even though there were to be some minor airborne operations, the Devils would from now on serve in an elite infantry role. After the war, Student would be found guilty of war crimes committed by men under his command in Crete.

## Italy, Sicily and North Africa

The first paratrooper unit to arrive in Africa in January 1942 was Kampfgruppe Burckhardt, which joined Rommel's Afrika Korps in the offensive that pushed the British back to Cyrenaica. In July the Fallschirmjäger-Brigade Ramcke, commanded by Generalmajor Bernhard Ramcke, arrived, seeing action in the front lines at El Alamein.

Devoid of motorised transport and cut off by General Montgomery's offensive, in October Ramcke chose not to surrender. In a legendary feat of arms he led his 600 remaining men across 320 kilometres of burning hot desert, capturing British transport vehicles, taking more than 100 prisoners and striking an enemy supply column to keep his men watered and fed. The remnants of some FJR units continued to serve in Africa until the capitulation of the German and Italian forces in May 1943.

From July 1943, German paratroopers were deployed in support of the Axis forces trying to defend Sicily from Allied invasion during Operation Husky. Five battalions of FJR 3 and FJR 4 saw action in the area of Catania where they met their British brethren, the Red Devils of the 1st Parachute Brigade, in action for the first time. After being pushed back with other German forces, the Fallschirmjäger was among the last to be evacuated from the island.

Shortly after the defection of Italy and the arrest of Mussolini, Fallschirmjäger-Division was among the units sent to Rome to disarm the Italian garrison. On 12 September, in Unternehmen Eiche, a Fallschirmjäger task force consisting of three companies of the Fallschirm-Lehrbattalion would conduct one of the most daring operations of the war.

After taking possession of the lower terminus of the cable car leading to the Hotel Campo Imperatore, a ski resort on Italy's Gran Sasso massif in the Apennine Mountains, 72 German

## GERMAN COMMANDERS USUALLY OPTED TO USE THE PARATROOPERS AS A KIND OF CRISIS REACTION FORCE"

paratroopers under command of Oberleutnant Georg Freiherr von Berlepsch landed by glider near the hotel itself with the task to free the imprisoned Benito Mussolini. They were supported by 16 Waffen-SS soldiers and six SD commandos of the Sonderverband Friedenthal under the command of Hauptsturmführer Otto Skorzeny. The Italian guards offered no resistance and Mussolini, accompanied by Skorzeny, was quickly flown out. Although the Fallschirmtruppe had conducted the operation, the German propaganda machine bestowed most of the glory on Skorzeny who, after a promotion, was awarded the Knight's Cross.

In January 1944, 1 Fallschirmjäger-Division found itself defending a part of the Gustav Line near Cassino, a small town at the foot of a hill and dominated by an ancient Benedictine monastery called Monte Cassino. The battle raged for nearly five months, during which the Allies threw themselves again and again against the German defences to achieve a breakthrough to Rome. Under the false impression that enemy units were positioned in it, the Allies bombed and destroyed the ancient building on 15 February 1944. The Fallschirmjäger immediately integrated the rubble and ruins into their defences, making it even harder to dislodge them.

The German paratroopers successfully disengaged and withdrew towards Rome in the middle of May. Fallschirmjäger units, including the newly formed 4 Fallschirmjäger-Division, continued to harass and fight the Allies near Anzio Nettuno, Florence, the Futa-Pass and Bologna up until the surrender of the German forces in Italy on 2 May 1945.

## Ostfront: Grave of the Devils

Military historiography rightfully depicts the Eastern Front as the Grab der Fallschirmtruppe (grave of the airborne forces). Due to their effectiveness and elite reputation, German commanders usually opted to use the paratroopers as a kind of crisis reaction force, a fire brigade of troops that could be thrown to wherever the situation was critical. To be able to fulfil that role, regiments were often committed piecemeal, sometimes in company strength and rarely more than 160 kilometres away from their parent unit.

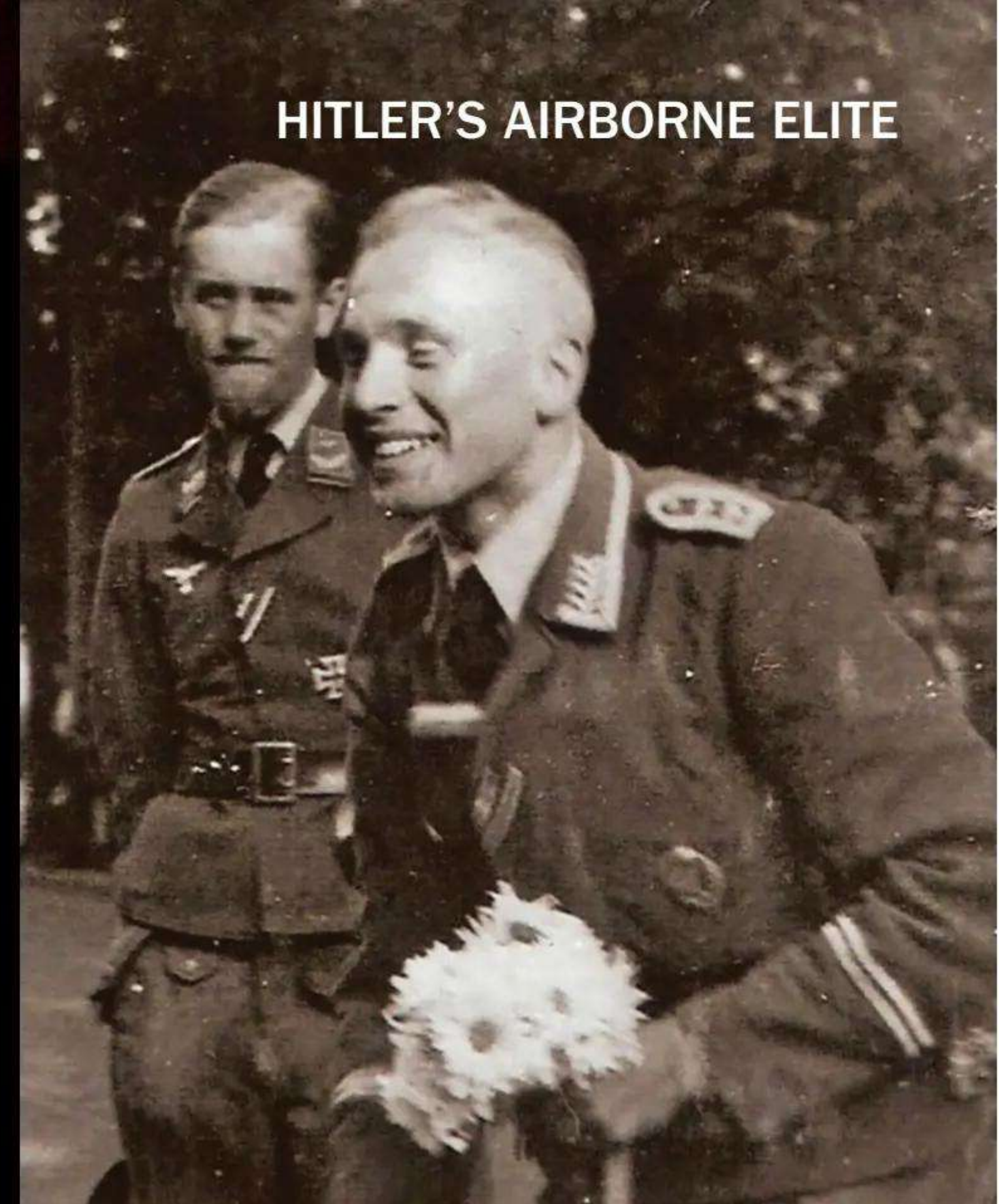
The war in the east was a war of ideologies, a war, as one officer put it, that was nastier and more terrifying than that in the west, war in its ugliest form and one in which mercy was neither

**Right, from top:** Young Fallschirmjäger Stabsfeldwebel upon returning from Crete. Grafenwöhr, June 1941

Group photo before the first jump – Young paratrooper recruits, Stendal 1940

Wehrmacht soldier firing STG44 – the problems resulting from the long magazine are easily recognisable

Luftlandetruppen: German Gebirgsjäger, mountain troops in a Junkers 52 transport plane, Crete 1941





given nor received. The first unit to deploy to the Eastern Front, only weeks after being mauled on Crete, was 7 Flieger-Division. Arriving in the deep forests and mosquito-ridden swamps of the Neva front in the Leningrad sector by the end of August 1941, its regiments were immediately thrown into action. Heeresgruppe Nord had laid siege to the ancient city; locked again and again into brutal battles with desperate Soviet troops trying to force a breakout, losses began to rise quickly. Within the first two months, the division had lost 3,000 men.

By October, all of II/Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment officers were killed or wounded within a week. On 3 October, its commander Major Stentzler sent out an honest and unadorned report by radio addressed to all units. "The enemy is worn out and demoralised. He doesn't believe in victory anymore. Neither do we!" He was killed the following day.

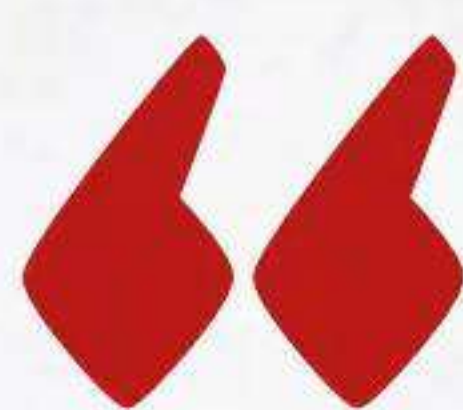
By mid November, in the early stages of one of the worst winters in recorded history, temperatures first began to drop to -30 degrees Celsius, yet the men of 7th Flieger held out until finally being relieved in early December. Looking back at his experiences, a young paratrooper wrote, "I'd rather land on Crete seven times over instead of fighting once on the Neva."

Fallschirmjäger units continued to serve in the east: at Leningrad and Stalingrad in 1942, Smolensk in 1942-43, at Zhitomir in November 1943 and Kirovograd in December of the same year. Things didn't change in 1944, when the precious airborne units were continuously decimated in desperate actions, always trying to block holes in the line to stem the advance of the Soviet juggernaut. Being pushed closer and closer towards the borders of the Reich, Fallschirmjäger ended up fighting in the Battle of Seelow and in Berlin itself.

## In defence of the Reich

After the Allied landings in Normandy on 6 June 1944, one of the first German units to engage the elite American troops of the 101st and

*In order to seize the initiative, these paratroopers train to attack and advance after landing. This is taking place in 1938 at the training school in Stendal*



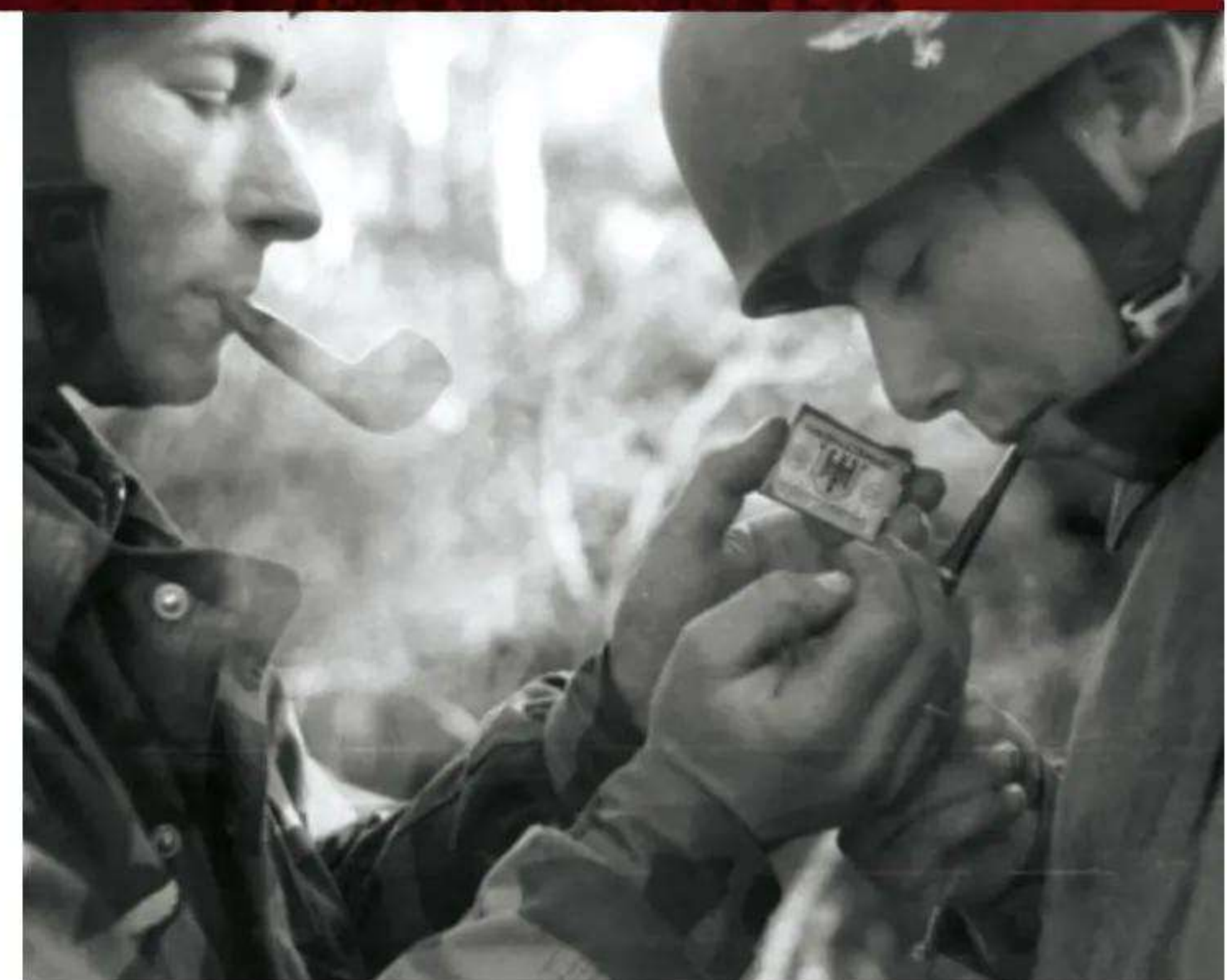
**EVEN THOUGH MOST OF THE SEASONED VETERANS OF PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS WERE NO MORE AND THE GAPS HAD BEEN FILLED WITH SUPERFICIALLY TRAINED AND INEXPERIENCED REPLACEMENTS, MORALE WAS FAR FROM BROKEN"**



82nd Airborne Divisions in the area of Carentan was FJR 6, under command of Major Friedrich von der Heydte. Although virtually destroyed, against all odds the fierce and effective resistance offered by FJR 6 earned them the respect of friend and foe alike and would coin their nickname 'The Lions of Carentan'.

While the Allies gathered strength on the beaches and bridgeheads, the Battle of Normandy raged on. Pinned down by Allied airpower and facing an enemy with near endless supplies and reserves, German units (paratroopers among them) suffered severe and irreplaceable casualties. When the Allies launched Operation Goodwood and Cobra, they pushed aside what little resistance the German defenders could offer. Four Fallschirmjäger-Divisionen were virtually wiped out in Normandy, the last, 2 FJD, surrendered at Brest in September 1944.

With the German front having been pushed back into Belgium, a number of new units, mostly consisting of the remnants of troops decimated in the Normandy fighting, were raised to form a new parachute army. This army, 1 Fallschirmjäger-Armee under General Student, saw action during Operation Market Garden where it acquitted itself well. Yet any resistance the German Army could offer could only hope to delay the Allied advance and it didn't take long until the Green Devils were



fighting on German territory. Unternehmen Stösser was launched on 16 December 1944 as part of the German offensive in the Ardennes and was to be the last German airborne operation of the war.

A paratrooper battle group commanded by Oberstleutnant von der Heydte was tasked to land behind enemy lines, north of Malmedy and to take and hold a strategically important crossroads. This was then to be defended until being relieved by 12 SS Panzer-Division.

These were not the paratroopers that had taken Crete or defended Monte Cassino, many of the men were young, inexperienced and had never seen combat. The same applied to the aircrew of the transport aircraft. Tricky weather conditions and inexperienced crews caused utter chaos.

Only having 125 men, a number of them injured from the drop and only lightly armed, there was no way that von der Heydte could complete his objective. Radios had been broken and there was no means by which to contact German HQ. Even though his force swelled to about 300 days later, he ordered his men to disperse in groups of three to four and make their way own back to German lines. Less than half arrived. Von der Heydte himself, painfully wounded in the arm during the drop, surrendered himself to the Americans a couple of days later.





# The ten commandments of the German paratrooper

**1 YOU ARE THE CHOSEN ONES OF THE GERMAN ARMY**

**2 YOU SHALL SEEK COMBAT AND TRAIN YOURSELVES TO ENDURE ANY MANNER OF TEST**

**3 TO YOU, BATTLE SHALL BE THE FULFILMENT**

**4 CULTIVATE TRUE COMRADESHIP, FOR BY THE AID OF YOUR COMRADES YOU WILL CONQUER OR DIE**

**5 BEWARE OF TALKING. BE NOT CORRUPTIBLE. MEN ACT WHILE WOMEN CHATTER. CHATTER MAY BRING YOU TO THE GRAVE**

**6 BE CALM AND PRUDENT, STRONG AND RESOLUTE. VALOUR AND ENTHUSIASM OF AN OFFENSIVE SPIRIT WILL CAUSE YOU TO PREVAIL IN THE ATTACK**

**7 THE MOST PRECIOUS THING IN THE PRESENCE OF THE FOE IS AMMUNITION. HE WHO SHOOTS USELESSLY, MERELY TO COMFORT HIMSELF, IS A MAN OF STRAW WHO MERITS NOT THE TITLE OF FALLSCHIRMJÄGER**

**8 YOU CAN TRIUMPH ONLY IF YOUR WEAPONS ARE GOOD. SEE TO IT THAT YOU SUBMIT YOURSELF TO THIS LAW – FIRST THY WEAPON, THEN THYSELF**

**9 YOU MUST GRASP THE FULL PURPOSE OF EVERY ENTERPRISE SO THAT IF YOUR LEADER IS KILLED YOU CAN FULFIL IT. AGAINST AN OPEN FOE, FIGHT WITH CHIVALRY, BUT TO A PARTISAN, EXTEND NO QUARTER**

**10 KEEP YOUR EYES WIDE OPEN. TUNE YOURSELF TO THE UTMOST PITCH. BE NIMBLE AS A GREYHOUND, TOUGH AS LEATHER, HARD AS KRUPP STEEL. YOU SHALL BE THE GERMAN WARRIOR INCARNATE**

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE GERMAN PARATROOPER, WRITTEN BY KURT STUDENT, WERE ISSUED TO GERMAN FALLSCHIRMJÄGERS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF CRETE



*Above, from left: Two Fallschirmjäger on the lookout for enemy movement, Italy 1943*

*While Tobacco rations to the Wehrmacht were reduced, it was one of the few comforts to enjoy on the front*

*Both airborne and mountain troops bury their fallen comrades after the Battle of Crete*

The last major actions of German paratroopers took part during the Allied Operations Plunder and Varsity and were fought across the Lower Rhine in Germany. Even though most of the seasoned veterans were no more and the gaps had been filled with superficially trained and inexperienced replacements, morale was far from broken. Comradeship and the fighting spirit of the Fallschirmtruppe still held the units together. Knowing this, German commanders again used them in a fire brigade role, committing battalions, companies and squads piecemeal across the defensive fronts where small groups fiercely defended rural farm complexes, forests and ruins of bombed villages and towns.

“During the fierce fighting in the Reichswald-Battle and during the defence of the Rhine, the Fallschirm Army had been heavily, in fact very heavily, melted down. Yet its fighting capacity remained unbroken until the last day. Up until the final hour, the spirit of the men remained second to none. It was the Fallschirm Army that dictated the rhythm and speed of our retreat.”







# HITLER'S ACES



The Luftwaffe's expert pilots tested their opponents to their limits in fierce dogfights and interception sorties, claiming thousands of aerial victories

WORDS TIM WILLIAMSON

**D**uring World War II, the Luftwaffe counted history's highest-scoring pilot aces, or Experten, among its ranks. Prior to the outbreak of the war, under terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty, Germany was unable to possess an air force, which forced the Nazis to improvise by training their pilots abroad and concealing their build-up of military planes and personnel under a commercial guise. This pretence ceased in 1935 when the existence

of the Luftwaffe was officially recognised – the secretive training programmes meant it began with many experienced aviators. This included veterans of the Condor Legion – Hitler's expeditionary force sent to fight in the Spanish Civil War, a brutal conflict that raged from 1936 to 1939 – but soon many young pilots, brought up through the ranks of the Hitler Youth, were making their name in aerial combat.

Many pilots honed their skills in dogfights over Britain, France and in North Africa, though

the Eastern Front saw by far the most aerial 'victories' of the war, meaning confirmed aircraft destroyed or incapacitated. In the East, Soviet planes and pilots were outmatched by their opponents, even during the dying months of the war as the Red Army advanced towards Berlin. Though many of the Luftwaffe's pilot aces would not see the end of the war, many others would go on to serve in democratic West Germany's resurrected air force, instructing and inspiring future generations of aviators.





## ADOLF GALLAND

**Years of service:** 1935–1945

**Kills:** 104

**W**ith schoolboy aspirations of becoming a commercial pilot, Adolf Galland instead joined the Luftwaffe while it was still a secretive air force. Training in Italy in the early 1930s, he was involved in several accidents, later joking he was known as the 'millionaire of the new Luftwaffe' due to the collective value of the aircraft he crashed. He joined Germany's Condor Legion, flying a Heinkel 51 in a ground-attack role.

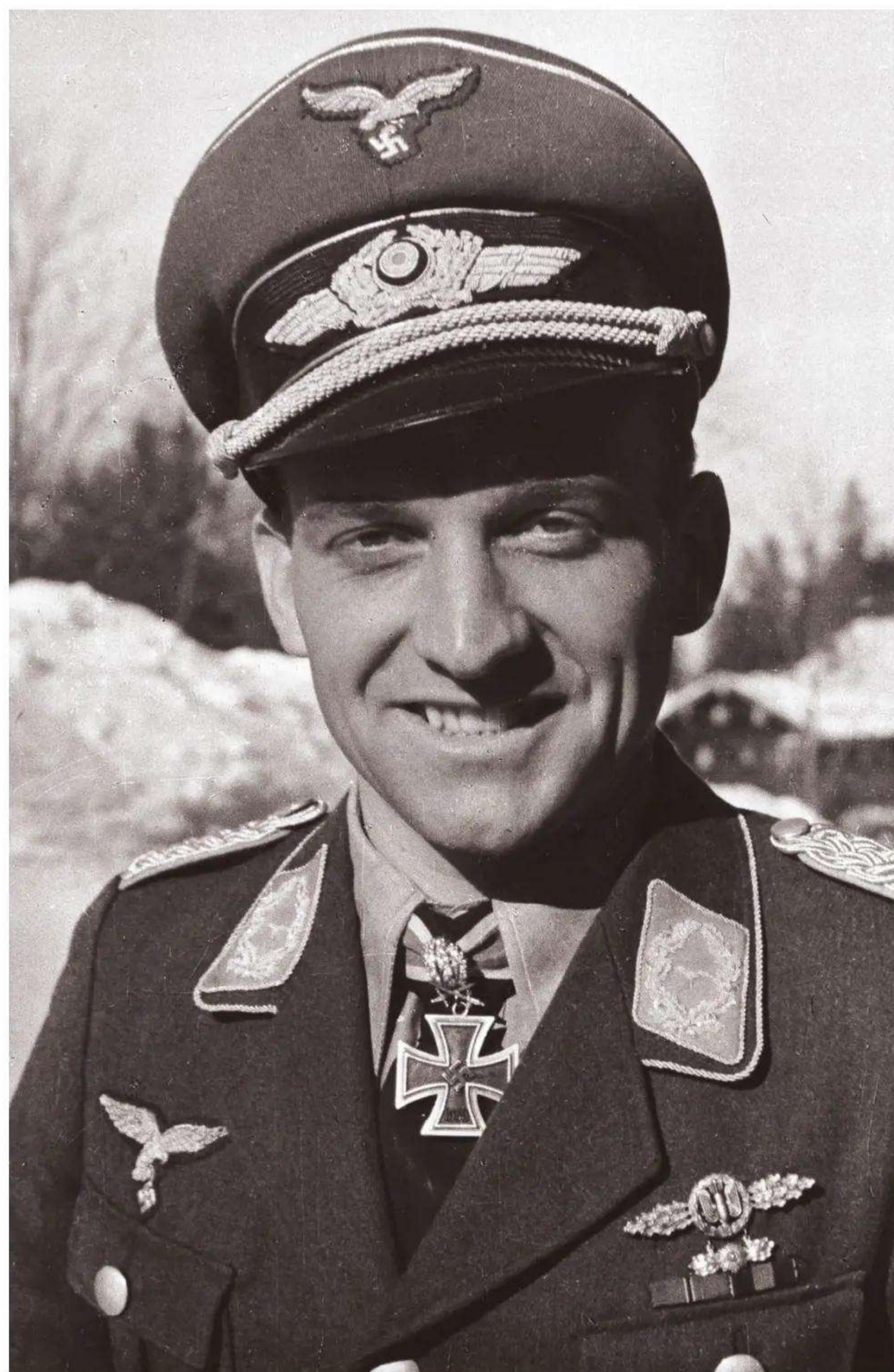
In 1939, Galland took part in the invasions of Poland and France, and he also fought in numerous dogfights in the Battle of Britain. When asked by Hermann Göring what his squadron needed to achieve victory over the RAF, Galland famously replied "Please Reichsmarschall equip my wings with Spitfires!"

By the end of 1940 he had achieved 58 victories and was promoted to fighter wing commander. He was shot down several times during fighting over Britain, escaping with injuries.

In 1941 Hitler awarded Galland diamonds to his Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves in recognition of his 94th victory. That same year, at the age of just 29, he was made General der Jagdflieger, placing him in charge of the Luftwaffe's fighter squadrons. This frustrated Galland, as the senior position meant he was not permitted to take to the skies, almost certainly limiting his final victory tally. He ended the war flying the Me 262 jet fighter, in which he achieved several more victories before being captured by American forces.



**BY THE END OF 1940 HE'D ACHIEVED 58 VICTORIES AND WAS PROMOTED"**



## HANS-ULRICH RUDEL

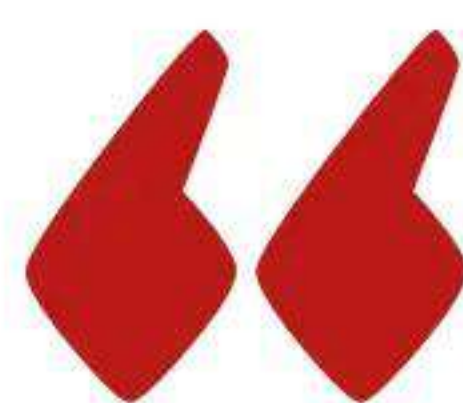
**Years of service:** 1936–1945

**Kills:** 500 tanks

**T**hough he later became the most decorated pilot in the Third Reich, Hans-Ulrich Rudel's wartime career began in much more modest circumstances. Not judged to be a capable aviator, he was assigned to flying reconnaissance missions during the invasions of Poland and France. It was not until 1941, during Operation Barbarossa, that he was given a chance to prove himself in combat, in a dive-bombing squadron flying Ju87 Stukas.

Rudel more than made up for lost time and became known for his deadly accuracy when attacking ground forces on the Eastern Front. By 1943 he had flown over 1,000 sorties, inflicting devastating losses on the Soviets, and by June 1944 he had destroyed over 300 Soviet tanks. His impressive victories had earned him immense prestige in Berlin, with even Hitler reportedly in awe of the pilot.

In December 1944 he was awarded the Knight's Cross with Golden Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds — he remained the only recipient of this decoration. By the end of the war, Rudel had flown around 2,500 sorties and taken out over 500 tanks, as well as hundreds more vehicles, artillery pieces, naval vessels and even a Soviet battleship.



**BY JUNE 1944 HE HAD DESTROYED OVER 300 SOVIET TANKS. HIS IMPRESSIVE VICTORIES HAD EARNED HIM IMMENSE PRESTIGE IN BERLIN"**





## HEINZ-WOLFGANG SCHNAUFER

**Years of service:** 1939–45

**Kills:** 121

**T**hough he achieved a modest tally compared with many of the Luftwaffe's Experten, Heinz-Wolfgang Schnauffer was unsurpassed in his ability to hunt down enemy aircraft in the dead of night. Schnauffer joined Nachtjagdgeschwader 1 – a Luftwaffe night-fighter air wing – in 1941, where he would take on the brunt of RAF Bomber Command in the skies over occupied Europe. His first victory was over Belgium when he destroyed a Halifax bomber, though he was badly wounded by returning fire.

In July 1943 he was promoted to Oberleutnant with 17 victories chalked up, which by December had grown to 40. He and his fellow night fighters flew Bf 110s, a twin-engine fighter-bomber with forward- and rear-facing guns. As a result, many of Schnauffer's victories were shared with his crew. The 110 also carried radar in order to more effectively hunt in the dark, though during a moonlit night skilled pilots were able to identify enemy formations by sight. One tactic Schnauffer deployed was to approach bombers from below, where they were more vulnerable and less able to return fire. This method proved hugely successful on 21 February 1945, when Schnauffer and his crew downed nine RAF bombers.

## ERICH HARTMANN

**Years of service:** 1940–45

**Kills:** 352

**J**ust 20 when he first arrived on the Eastern Front, Erich Hartmann achieved an unsurpassed 352 aerial victories, making him the highest-scoring fighter ace in history.

A member of the Hitler Youth, Hartmann was introduced to flying from an early age and by 11 was piloting gliders. He started his Luftwaffe training in 1940 and graduated two years later, joining Jagdgeschwader 52 – or the 52nd fighter wing – on the Eastern Front.

His first aerial victory came in November 1942 while leading an attack on a group of Soviet Il-2 ground-attack aircraft. Piloting a much faster and more agile Bf 109, Hartmann successfully attacked the weaker underside of one of the Soviet planes, causing it to explode. Unfortunately for the young German, the explosion from the enemy aircraft damaged his Messerschmitt, forcing him to perform an emergency landing.

In just a short time, Hartmann had notched up an impressive tally of victories, earning him renown among his peers and infamy among Soviet pilots, who nicknamed him the "Black Devil". On 2 August he achieved his 50th victory – four months later that number had tripled. His 352nd and final victory came on the final day of the war in Europe. Spotting a Yak-7 performing some celebratory aerial aerobatics, Hartmann struck from above and destroyed it with a well-aimed burst of gunfire. Shortly after landing he was captured and remained a prisoner until 1955.

**HARTMANN ACHIEVED AN UNSURPASSED 352 AERIAL VICTORIES"**







## GERHARD BARKHORN

**Years of service:** 1938–1945

**Kills:** 301 tanks

**O**f the Luftwaffe's Experten, Gerhard Barkhorn was the second-highest scoring and the only pilot other than Erich Hartmann to achieve over 300 aerial victories. Barkhorn flew with Hartman in Jagdgeschwader 52, a fighter wing on the Eastern Front, where he achieved great success.

After joining the Luftwaffe in 1938, Barkhorn flew during the Battle of Britain, though he had to wait until the launch of Operation Barbarossa in 1941 before he achieved his first victory on his 120th sortie. Just over a year later he had downed 59 enemy planes and was awarded the Knight's Cross. By January 1943 he had doubled this number during combat in the East and was in command of his own squadron. In May 1944 he was severely wounded during a dogfight when a Soviet P-39 strafed the side of his aircraft, penetrating his cockpit and injuring his right arm and leg. Being hospitalised for several months put a pause on his impressive tally of 273 victories.

In 1945 Barkhorn was handpicked to fly Me 262 fighter jets, though he would not gain any success in the *schwalbe*, or 'swallow' as it was known. Surviving the war, Barkhorn later served in the Federal German Republic's air force from 1956 until his retirement in 1976.



## HANS-JOACHIM MARSEILLE

**Years of service:** 1938–1942

**Kills:** 158

**M**averick, troubled youth and arrogant rogue: in his short career Hans-Joachim Marseille amassed a reputation on the ground matched only by his abilities in the air. Attending flight school in 1939, he gained the reputation of a hellraiser, listening to jazz music (banned by the Nazi Government) often partying all night and flying away from his classmates during class to perform his own solo aerobatics – showing both his piloting skills and disdain for authority.

Marseille earned his first victory in the Battle of Britain, downing a Hawker Hurricane over Kent in August 1940. He soon developed a reputation as a crack shot, one able to hit his targets while pulling fast manoeuvres, all while staying as close as possible. This tactic did not come without risk and Marseille was himself hit several times, forcing him to abandon his aircraft over the English Channel on many occasions.

However, it was in North Africa that Marseille scored a majority of his victories, earning him the nickname "Star of Africa". Here he regularly downed multiple enemies in a single sortie. Unlike many of the high-scoring Luftwaffe aces, Marseille's victories were all won against the Western Allies. In a single day, on 1 September 1942, he claimed 17 victories across three separate sorties, and he went on to score a further 12 over the following two days. His career was tragically cut short on 30 September 1942 when his Bf 109G encountered engine failure. Marseille bailed out but immediately struck the aircraft's tail and fell to his death. He was just short of his 23rd birthday.

**“A YEAR LATER HE HAD DOWNED 59 PLANES AND WAS AWARDED THE KNIGHT'S CROSS”**



## HITLER'S ELITE

*One of Hitler's most trusted military commanders, Dönitz was eventually named as the Führer's successor*





# DÖNITZ: HITLER'S LION



The commander of Germany's World War II U-boat fleet pioneered the wolfpack strategy to hunt Allied ships

**K**arl Dönitz was an accomplished Kriegsmarine commander, his innovative U-boat tactics responsible for the demise of countless Allied ships. Despite not being a member of the Nazi Party, he was a fanatical supporter of Germany's aggressive international interests and believed that his methods could help bring the Allied war machine to its knees. Born on 16 September 1891 in the outskirts of Berlin, he was the son of an engineer and a housewife. His first taste of serving at sea came in 1910 when aged 18 he signed up as a sea cadet in the Kaiserliche Marine (Imperial German Navy). Dönitz immediately showed a gift for leadership and initially served as an airfield commander. He soon grew tired of the post he had been assigned to and requested a move to the submarine service. This was approved and he stepped aboard his first U-boat, UC-68 as a Watch Officer before taking command of UC-25 and then UB-68 in 1918. His first taste of submarine leadership was curtailed after UB-68 was sunk by British warships off the coast of Malta. Dönitz was captured and imprisoned until after the war's end.

Undeterred by Germany's catastrophic loss in World War I and the sanctions placed on the military by the Treaty of Versailles, Dönitz enlisted in the Weimar Republic Navy. By 1928 he had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander and captained the training cruiser, Emden. He spent a significant amount of time on board the ship, training the next generation of naval cadets in round-the-world trips. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party's ascent to power in the Reichstag resulted in significant changes in the German Navy. Choosing to ignore the restrictions put upon the armed forces at Versailles, the Führer secretly directed extra funds and manpower to the newly formed Kriegsmarine. This included the return of U-boats. Dönitz was one of the men tasked with command as he took charge of a U-boat flotilla. It was now clear to the Berliner that in a future conflict, submarine warfare would play a major role.

## In command

Dönitz was appointed Führer der Unterseeboote (commander of submarines) in 1936. He was now one of the world's leading experts in submarine warfare and Hitler was confident that this section of the Kriegsmarine would play a key role in the Third Reich's war machine. German submariners were trained to employ group hunting tactics that would pursue and

then destroy enemy ships carrying troops or cargo. This 'wolf pack' strategy would be the Blitzkrieg of the water in the first few years of the war. So confident was Dönitz in underwater warfare, that in 1937 he requested that the entire Kriegsmarine be turned into submarines. This, he believed would be the best way to starve Britain into submission in a future war. His appeal was flatly turned down by his superior, Großadmiral (grand admiral) Erich Raeder. Raeder was born of an older generation and was much more of a traditionalist. A veteran of the Battle of Jutland, he liked nothing more than the sight of a grandiose battleship like Tirpitz; he was convinced that cruisers were still a significant part of naval warfare and considered submarine attacks as cowardly. Eight months before the Wehrmacht thundered into Poland, Dönitz was promoted to commodore and tasked with the leadership of every submarine in the navy. He realised that Germany's navy lagged behind both the army and the air force. He had previously stated

that 300 Type VII U-boats would be enough to defeat the Royal Navy, but found himself with only 22 of these vessels, and 57 U-boats in total, after war was declared. Clashing with Hermann Göring after an argument over Luftwaffe funds being redirected to the Kriegsmarine, Dönitz took a backseat for the first year of the war. Rather than targeting merchant shipping to try to cripple Britain's trade, early raiding campaigns were launched such as the attack on Scapa Flow, which sunk a British carrier and a battleship for moderate U-boat losses. Shortly after, Dönitz got his wish and the era of feared U-boat wolf packs began. Working in long lines of communication, once an Allied convoy was sighted, all U-boats in the area would be summoned and the enemy vessel would be torpedoed to oblivion. This, coupled with Dönitz's promotion to vice admiral in September 1940 and the arrival of more and more Type VIIs, made it a profitable period for Dönitz's tactics as his wolf packs decimated huge amounts of British merchant traffic. When

**“THE ERA OF FEARED U-BOAT WOLF PACKS BEGAN. WORKING IN LONG LINES OF COMMUNICATION, ONCE AN ALLIED CONVOY WAS SIGHTED, ALL U-BOATS IN THE AREA WOULD BE SUMMONED AND THE ENEMY VESSEL WOULD BE TORPEDOED TO OBLIVION”**



*Dönitz and his wolf packs came unstuck later in the war against superior Allied technology and resources*





Dönitz in the custody of the British army after his arrest in 1945. He was tried at Nuremberg and sentenced to ten years

Hitler declared war on the USA on 11 December 1941, its ships were to be the next victims.

Großadmiral

Hitler’s warmongering with the USA is often seen as one of his greatest mistakes. However, at the time, Dönitz was delighted as it gave him another opportunity to unleash the U-boats on the Allies. In fact, the vice admiral had been encouraging the Führer to do so for months. Hitler was fast coming round to the idea of submarine warfare and Dönitz’s stock was rising fast as he began to rival Raeder in the Führer’s affections. Back in the Atlantic, unescorted American ships were being routed. The Kriegsmarine had successfully driven a wedge between British and US flotillas and now had the advanced Type IX U-boats at its disposal as more and more Allied tonnage was sunk. Every move was being orchestrated by Dönitz from his war room in Lorient, Brittany in occupied France. In his headquarters he had estimated that German U-boats needed to be sinking 750,000 tons of Allied shipping every month to successfully bring the enemy

to its knees. As it turned out, this was out of reach for the Germans and even at their peak they could only sink a maximum of 637,000 tons, a nevertheless impressive feat that was attained in June 1942. Dönitz’s dynamic leadership was rewarded with a Knight’s Cross and a promotion to admiral. Finally, he was receiving the extra U-boats he craved. From the summer of 1942 until the end of the year, 30 new U-boats were pressed into service every month. Unfortunately, there were only negligible technological upgrades and with each casualty, U-boat captains were becoming less well trained. Success in the Battle of the Atlantic now depended on Dönitz’s strategy more than ever. Later that year Enigma, which was used by Dönitz’s to relay secret messages between U-boats, was cracked. Initially, this only had minor effects on the war at sea as the Kriegsmarine still held the upper hand. Dönitz was promoted once again, this time taking the resigning Raeder’s place as grand admiral on 31 January 1943. The new leader celebrated his achievement by

flying a commander-in-chief’s flag over his headquarters and reassuring the German people that he would “fight to a finish” in a campaign that would be “waged with still greater vigour and determination than hitherto.”

Fight to a finish

As grand admiral, Dönitz utilised a top-down structure. This way he was able to monitor the movements of his vessels personally. The move paid off as he skilfully coordinated the wolf packs along with supporting reconnaissance aircraft and other vessels. However, no matter how successfully Dönitz synchronised his movements, British and US admirals had got wise to the U-boat threat and were implementing new and improved technology that would blast them from the depths. The dream of blockading the British Isles was fading fast. Dönitz did recognise the Kriegsmarine’s dire need to advance its technologies, but it was too little too late. The blockade was abandoned in May 1943 and the next two years leading up to the end of the war were frequent drawbacks punctured by

Defining moments

**TYPE VII U-BOAT**  
**THE SMALL SUB WITH LIMITED FIREPOWER**  
From the start of the war, Dönitz concentrated his strategy on the Type VII U-boat. Small with a short range, he believed that it would be able to provide the Kriegsmarine with all the submarine firepower it needed to defeat the Royal Navy. The craft wasn’t as much use further out in the Atlantic and began to struggle when the USA entered the war. It was superseded by the improved Type IX, but the glut of Type VIIs demonstrated how unprepared Germany was for full-scale war at sea.

**THE SECOND HAPPY TIME**  
**U-BOATS ENJOY MORE SUCCESS**  
Beginning in late 1941, long-range German Type IX submarines were targeting the USA. Known as Operation Drumbeat or the Second Happy Time, U-boats made a string of successes sinking a number of Allied vessels. This lasted for around seven months with the first U-boat casualty being as late as 12 April 1942 when U-85 was sunk. In total, 609 Allied ships equalling 3,100,000 tons were sunk in the operation, which was the last great hurrah for Dönitz and the Kriegsmarine.

**THE BROTHERS DÖNITZ**  
**BOTH WERE KILLED IN ACTION**  
Both of Dönitz’s sons served in the Kriegsmarine during World War II. His younger son Peter gave his life for his country at the age of 21, dying on U-934, which was sunk on 19 May 1943. The loss persuaded his father to allow Peter’s older brother Klaus to leave active service in the Kriegsmarine and study to become a doctor. Going against orders, Klaus died aboard a torpedo boat that was sunk off Selsey, England on 13 May 1944. Karl’s daughter Ursula meanwhile married U-boat commander Günther Hessler.



*Historians speculate that Dönitz could have defeated Britain by sea power alone had Hitler given him the right support and funds*



sprouts of success. New U-boats including the Type XII and the advanced yet short in supply Type XXI were rushed into action. Yet slowly but surely, Dönitz's forces were driven from the Atlantic as Allied microwave radar picked off the remaining wolf packs. The Royal Navy was now actively seeking out U-boats, not avoiding them, and the Kriegsmarine was fighting a campaign it couldn't win. He may have been a brilliant U-boat commander but Dönitz did not take the life of the average submariner into account and continued to send outdated U-boats out against the vastly technologically superior enemy.

As the Third Reich creaked under the strain of the advancing Allied armies, Hitler became increasingly paranoid and reckless, trusting almost no one. One commander he did have confidence in was Dönitz and as the Wehrmacht was being pushed to breaking point, he appointed him as the head of the Northern Military and Civil Command on 20 April 1945. Dönitz got the ultimate promotion less than a month later as the Führer selected him as his successor. Assuming the role of Reichspräsident, he became the final leader of the crumbling Third Reich. As Reichspräsident he attempted to save as many German lives as possible, advising citizens to travel west away from the advancing Soviets and attempting to negotiate good terms of surrender for Nazi Germany. The unconditional surrender was signed with the Western Allies in Reims on 7 May and then with the USSR a day later in Berlin. After the war, Dönitz was tried at Nuremberg. He was judged to have been an advocate of Nazism and was considered a major war criminal. He was imprisoned for ten years and died on Christmas Eve 1980. Karl Dönitz is remembered as a master tactician who was a constant thorn in the side of Allied shipping operations. If given more resources, he could well have made the Battle of the Atlantic a more tightly contested affair.

*The cruiser Emden, which Dönitz commanded for a year during the interwar period*





# NAVY COMMANDERS

The leading German naval commanders, from Jutland veterans to captains with secret Jewish ancestry

## OTTO KRETSCHMER

The deadliest submariner of the war

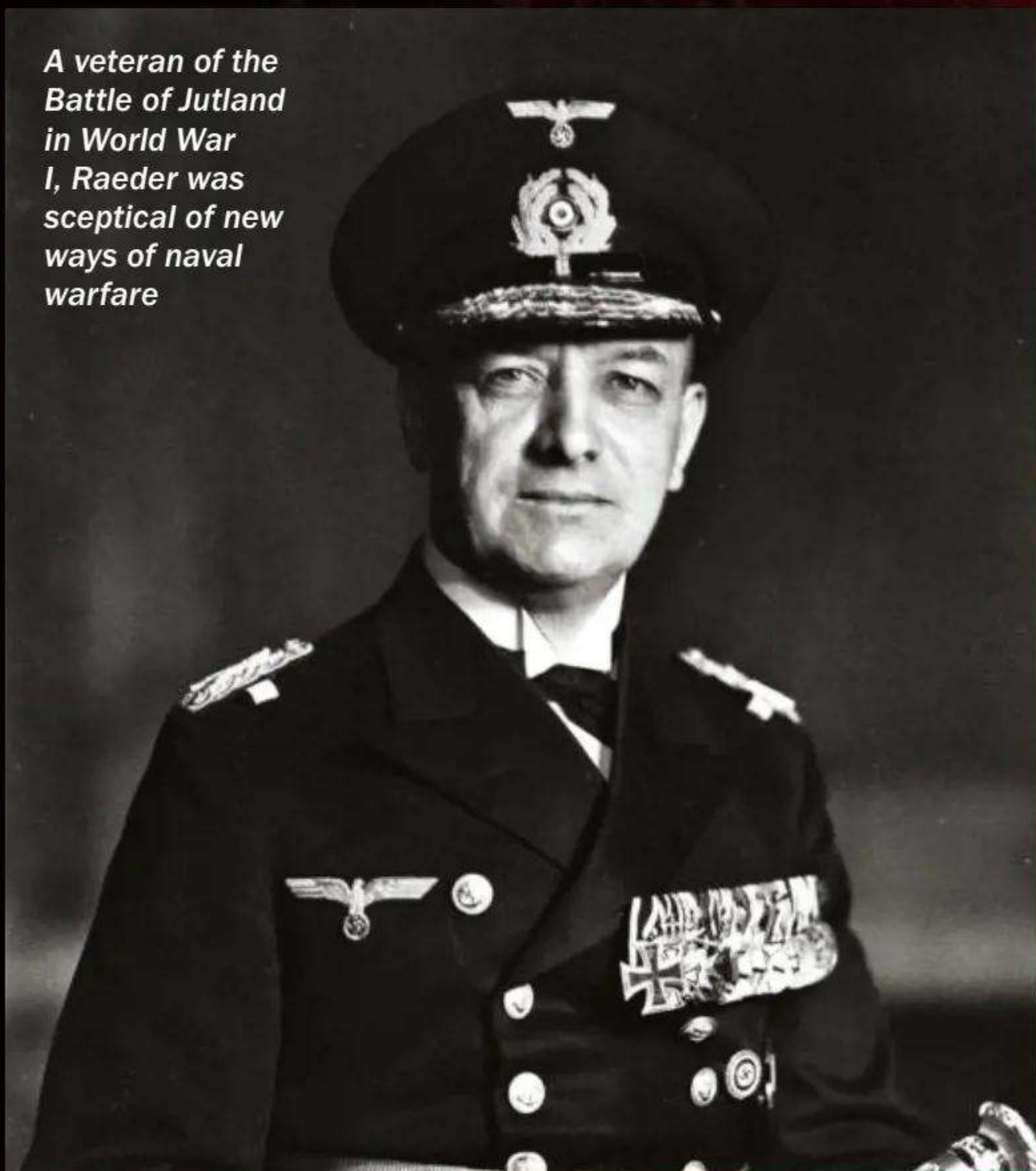
Years: 1912–1998 Country: Nazi Germany

**O**tto Kretschmer was one of the most highly skilled Kriegsmarine commanders in the Atlantic and a constant thorn in the side of the Allied navies. In the first 18 months of the war alone he sank 44 ships, equal to 266,000 tons of shipping. Prior to the war, Kretschmer had led an unremarkable career in the Weimar Republic's fledgling navy. At the start of the war the young submariner was in command of the U-23 in the North Sea. After sinking a number of Allied merchant vessels, he became one of the first commanders of the war to down a military ship as he sank the HMS Daring off the coast of Norway. He was transferred a few months later to U-99, a more capable Type VII B submarine. Kretschmer and his crew tormented the Royal Navy's convoys under the cover of night and in one month at the tail end of 1940, he managed to sink 46,000 tons of Allied shipping. Kretschmer was a courageous captain who treated the crews of the ships he sank with dignity. There are even reports of him advising survivors in lifeboats to the nearest stretch of land. His unrivalled success came down to his tactic of firing just one fatal torpedo at a target. This way he saved up ammunition for further attacks on other ships before returning to shore. Dönitz praised Kretschmer for his innovative thinking, but the modest commander himself attributed his success to the two golden horseshoes that he placed on his conning tower to bring luck. On 17 March 1941 Kretschmer's streak was finally ended by HMS Walker, which damaged U-99 so badly it was scuttled. Sent to a POW camp in Canada, Kretschmer continued the war effort by keeping in contact with Naval High Command. He was returned to Germany after the war and was such an ardent submariner that he served in the Bundesmarine until 1970.



Kretschmer was nicknamed 'Silent Otto' by his colleagues due to his preference to maintain complete radio silence when on patrol

A veteran of the Battle of Jutland in World War I, Raeder was sceptical of new ways of naval warfare



## ERICH RAEDER

Old-school commander of the Kriegsmarine

Years: 1876–1960 Country: Nazi Germany

**T**he commander-in-Chief of the German Navy since 1928, Erich Raeder was the undisputed leader of the Kriegsmarine. The Hamburger had a long-held belief that the German navy should challenge the supremacy of the Royal Navy. Raeder was never interested in Nazi politics, but in the interwar period he directed the secret rejuvenation of the German fleet. During the war, he suggested and then directed the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, giving the Kriegsmarine essential extra ports in Scandinavia. Raeder's downfall came soon after, when he suggested that Hitler focus German resources on maritime operations in the Mediterranean rather than invade the USSR. This did not sit well with the Führer and further strategic differences led to his dismissal in 1943. He was replaced by Dönitz and sloped off into obscurity as the Third Reich crumbled. After the war he was sentenced to life imprisonment as a war criminal before being released in 1955 due to ill health.



HE SUGGESTED AND THEN DIRECTED THE GERMAN INVASION OF DENMARK AND NORWAY



## GÜNTHER LÜTJENS

The skilled captain of the Bismarck

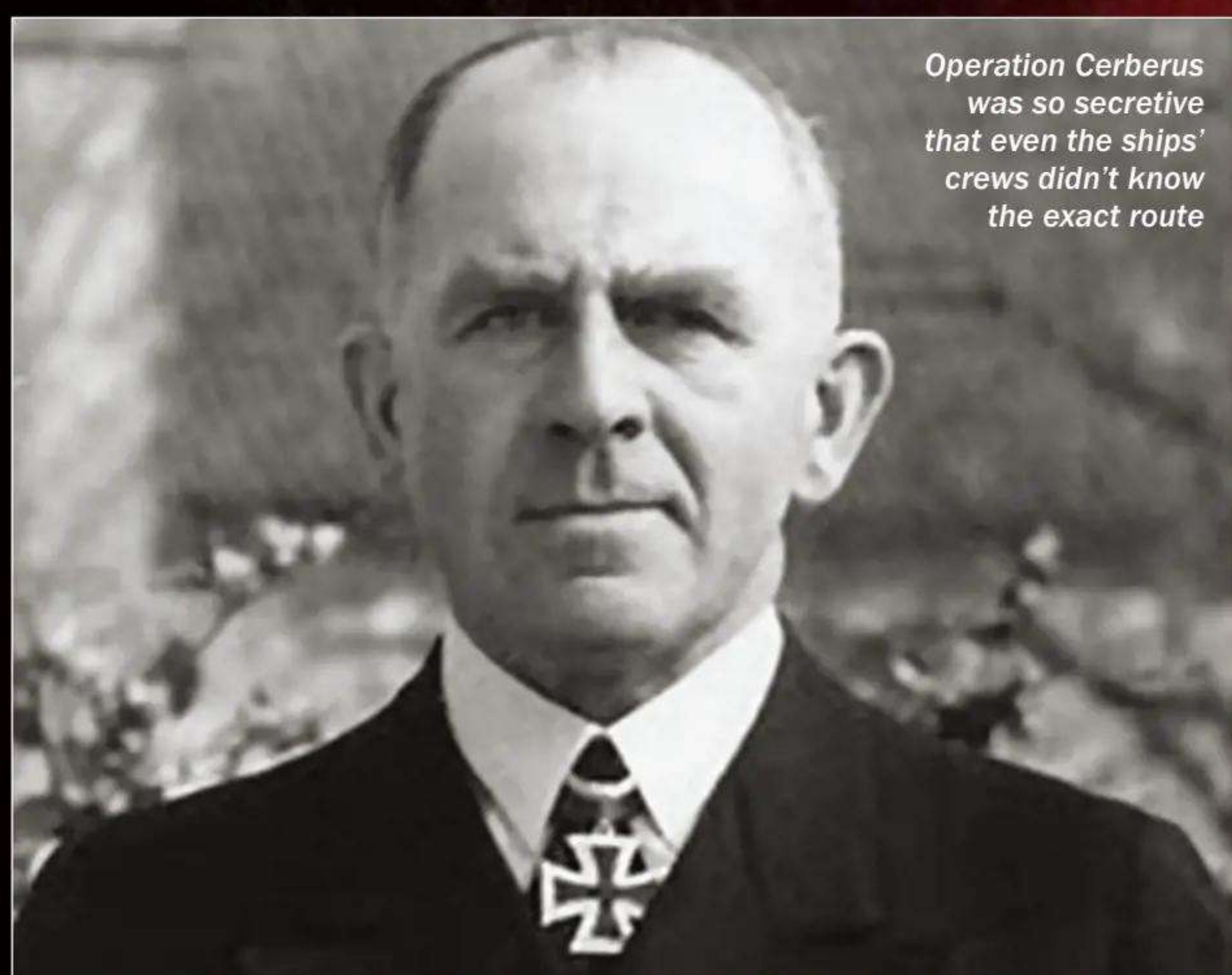
**Years:** 1889–1941 **Country:** Nazi Germany

**D**espite boasting Jewish heritage and a dislike of Nazism, Günther Lütjens ended the war as one of the Kriegsmarine's most decorated commanders. He played a leading role in the 1940 invasion of Norway and, having earned Raeder's trust, was promoted to admiral. His next success came in the Atlantic as aboard the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, he sank and captured 22 Allied vessels. After some respite at the German naval base in Brest in occupied France, in May 1941 Lütjens embarked on what would be his final mission. Commanding the battleship Bismarck, he battled Royal Navy battleships between Iceland and Greenland, sinking HMS Hood and defeating HMS Prince. Bismarck was later spotted by a British recon plane and, now completely outnumbered, was sunk by devastating salvos from renewed torpedo attacks; Lütjens and 2,106 members of the crew perished. Throughout the war, Lütjens refused the Nazi salute for a traditional navy gesture and decorated his ships with naval, not Nazi insignias.

**LÜTJENS REFUSED THE NAZI SALUTE FOR A TRADITIONAL NAVY GESTURE"**



*With his Jewish heritage, it is remarkable how far Lütjens rose in Nazi Germany's anti-Semitic state*



*Operation Cerberus was so secretive that even the ships' crews didn't know the exact route*

## OTTO CILIAX

An admiral famous for the Channel Dash

**Years:** 1891–1964 **Country:** Nazi Germany

**O**tto Ciliax had been part of the Germany Navy since 1910. After serving on Scharnhorst, he was promoted to rear admiral and was put in command of all German battleships between 1941 and 1942. His most famous moment came in February 1942 when he led Operation Cerberus – or, as it is commonly known, the Channel Dash. Hitler, once again going against Raeder's advice, ordered battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau to make the risky journey from Brest to be deployed in German operations in Norway. The only route was through the English Channel, which was under constant surveillance by the Royal Navy. Departing on a moonless night, the convoy made its way through the Channel unscathed and to safety. It remains a humiliating episode for the Royal Navy, but a surprising success for the Germans. Ciliax was made commander of German naval forces in Norway for the remainder of the war, fighting back against escalating British commando attacks.

## HANS-GEORG VON FRIEDEBURG

Dönitz's successor and peace negotiator

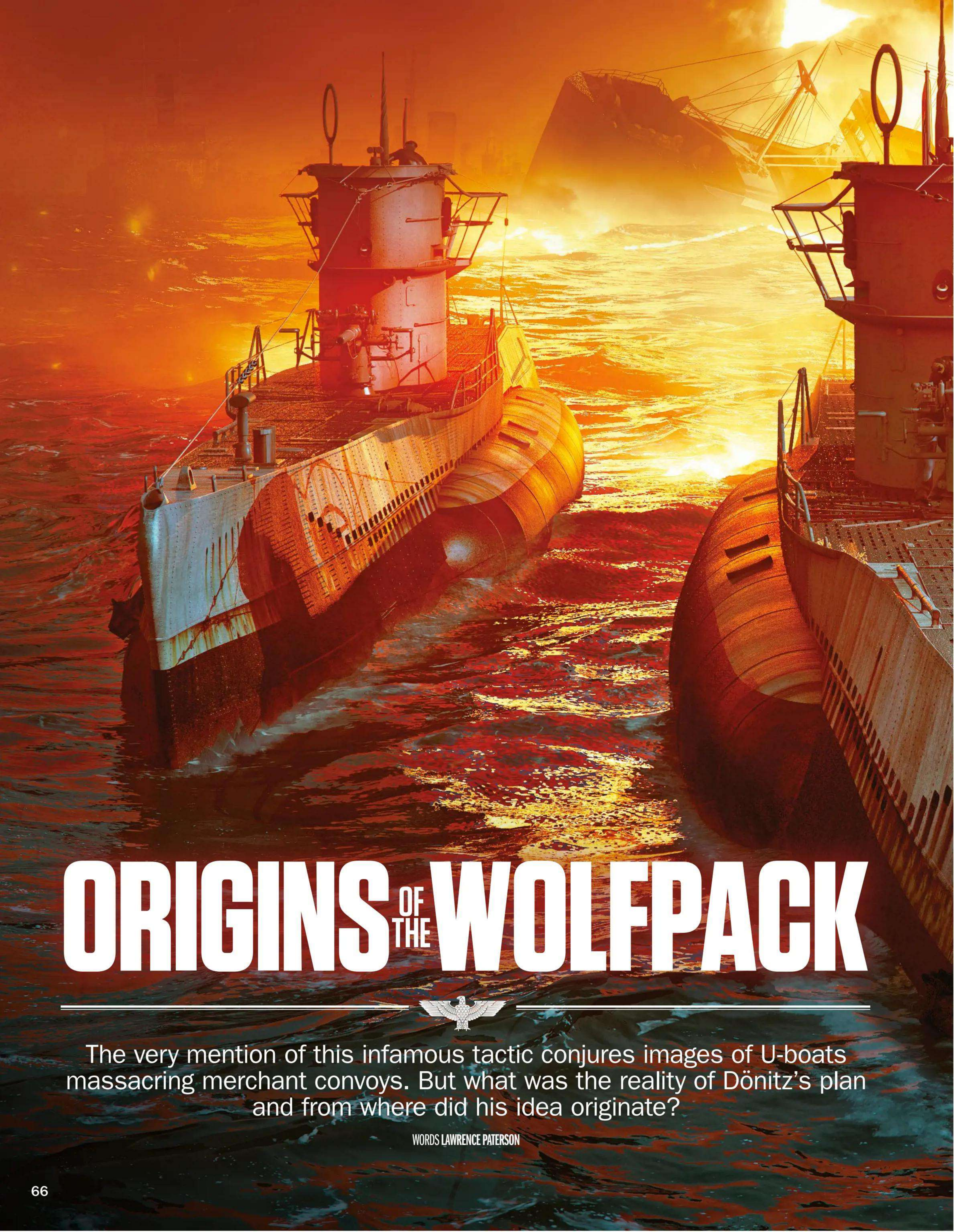
**Years:** 1895–1945 **Country:** Nazi Germany

**L**ike Lütjens, von Friedeburg was of Jewish descent but unlike the Bismarck captain, he was very pro-Nazi. With Heinrich Himmler shielding his ancestry from other Nazis, von Friedeburg rose to deputy commander of the Reich's U-boat forces. He was tasked with maintaining Kriegsmarine bases in France and orchestrating submarine attacks on Allied convoys in the Atlantic. Von Friedeburg's status escalated towards the end of the war as he was made commander in chief of the Kriegsmarine after Dönitz succeeded Hitler as leader of Germany. With the Allies advancing on Berlin from both east and west, von Friedeburg's role as commander was curtailed before it could even begin. He later met with Field Marshal Montgomery to negotiate peace terms and sign surrender documents to end the war. After discovering that the Allies were planning on arresting him as a war criminal, he committed suicide on 23 May 1945 to avoid imprisonment.



*Von Friedeburg was tasked by Dönitz to meet with the Allies and sign the official German surrender*





# ORIGINS OF THE WOLFPACK



The very mention of this infamous tactic conjures images of U-boats massacring merchant convoys. But what was the reality of Dönitz's plan and from where did his idea originate?

WORDS LAWRENCE PATERSON







**T**he origins of Karl Dönitz's fearsome 'Rudeltaktik' – anglicised as 'wolfpack tactics' – can rightly be attributed to the Führer der Unterseeboote (FdU, Commander of Submarines) of the previous war – Fregattenkapitän Hermann Bauer. Bauer maximised the potential of this new weapon in the naval arsenal, his U-boats achieving great success, bringing Britain's merchant shipping balance to near bankruptcy in the first half of 1917. This was achieved with U-boats operating independent of one another or any centralised control. Such fearsome losses prompted the British Admiralty to introduce convoying during that year as a means of 'collective defence'. In response Bauer submitted a proposal to the German naval staff that U-boats alter tactics and be co-ordinated and concentrated on crucial inbound British convoys. He intended to achieve this level of control by means of a large radio-equipped transport U-boat of the Deutschland class that could operate as a mobile command centre at sea. Staffed by trained wireless and decryption personnel, this U-boat would monitor British radio signals to anticipate convoy movements and direct accompanying combat boats to intercept en-masse. However, despite Bauer's sound logic, the proposal was rejected.

Ultimately the First World War U-boats were defeated, though their subjugation was no means a decisive Allied victory as just under half of the operational U-boats that had been built remained combat-ready in November 1918. It was not only improved enemy anti-submarine warfare techniques and the introduction of escorted convoys that had beaten their campaign. Germany's U-boats lacked a powerful charismatic leader capable of forging fresh tactics, rather than accepting the status quo, particularly after Bauer's replacement in June 1917.

While true that the technical limitations of radio equipment aboard the First World War U-boats severely hindered inter-boat cooperation at sea, there were localised efforts at coordinating attacks. One such attempt

took place in the Mediterranean during October 1918 when skippers of two U-boats of the Pola Flotilla planned to sail and rendezvous on 3 October, 50 miles from Sicily's south-eastern corner. There they expected to intercept Allied convoy traffic from the east. However, one boat's departure was delayed by urgent repair work and only UB68 sailed as planned.

This U-boat encountered the enemy on 4 October, sinking 3,883-ton British steamer SS Oopack before being forced to dive by escort ships. Sudden technical problems resulted in a loss of control, and the boat plunged below its maximum rated depth. It was only saved by the commander ordering the ballast tanks be blown, bringing UB68 hurtling to the surface amidst the convoy it had just attacked. Illuminated by flares and searchlights, UB68 was shelled and sunk with four men killed and 33 captured. The young skipper, Oberleutnant zur See Karl Dönitz, was among the survivors:

"In October 1918 I was captain of a submarine in the Mediterranean near Malta. On a dark night I met a British convoy with cruisers and destroyers. I attacked and I sank a ship, but the chance would have been greater if there had been a lot of submarines. That's why the idea of a wolfpack, to put the submarines together so they could attack together, was very impressive. That's why, in all the years from 1918 to 1935 when we had the first submarines again in the German navy, I had never forgotten this idea."

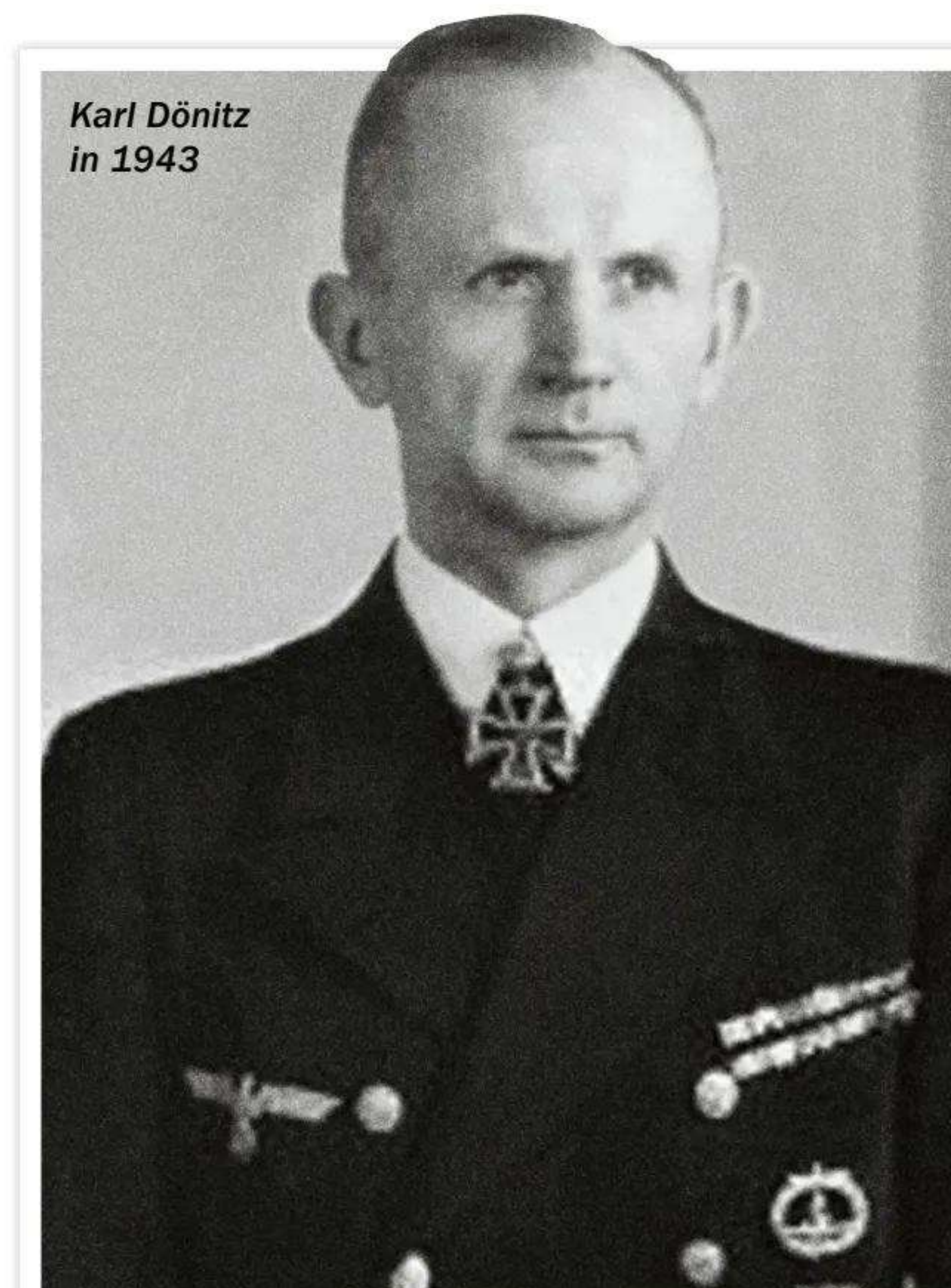
**AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE  
RARELY BECAME A  
CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO U-BOAT  
SUCCESS, DESPITE DÖNITZ'S BEST  
EFFORTS TO CO-OPERATE WITH THE  
LUFTWAFFE FOR THIS PURPOSE"**

Following Hitler's rise to power the German navy experienced a resurgence, and in September 1935 Kapitän zur See Dönitz was placed in command of the 'Weddigen' flotilla of small Type II coastal boats. He did not hold the post for long, promoted to FdU within the new Kriegsmarine during the following January, and then later to the role of BdU, (Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote, Commander-in-Chief Submarines).

Dönitz threw himself into development of a fresh tactical doctrine for undersea warfare, centred on his wolfpack theories of coordinated group attacks. This technique was first used in large-scale Wehrmacht exercises during the autumn of 1937.

From the U-boat depot ship Saar Dönitz directed several U-boats in locating an 'enemy' convoy, gathering and then launching an 'attack', all with impressive results. Dönitz instructed his youthful skippers to strike with torpedoes while running surfaced at night, using the U-boat's high surface speed, manoeuvrability, and low profile to its fullest advantage. Radar was extremely uncommon on enemy ships at that time and, by this method, British ASDIC location sonar was also rendered useless. The Baltic was too small for Dönitz to fully test his theories on group operations, but repeated requests for permission to stage Atlantic exercises were refused, lest British and French naval authorities misconstrue the presence of U-boats in any strength within the Atlantic while the Spanish Civil War raged. Not until May 1939 did a small number of U-boats undertake any such exercises in the North Sea and, later, west of the Iberian Peninsula.

Though feeling justified in his faith in the wolfpack there remained unanswered questions centred on the two pillars of his theory: control and communications. Was it possible to simultaneously exert command over several U-boats? Did they require authority exercised by an officer at sea? Was it possible to do so from another U-boat or a surface vessel or was it possible from a land-based station? How best to communicate with U-boats when surfaced, at periscope depth or deeper? Finally



Karl Dönitz  
in 1943



Early wolfpack strategy dictated the contact U-boat shadow the convoy until the pack had gathered before attacking surfaced at night



## FORWARD TORPEDO ROOM

A Type VII carried 14 torpedoes, which were stored in every available nook and cranny. The torpedo room crew slept either in the smattering of bunks wedged between the missiles and equipment, or simply napped on the floor. The four torpedo tubes were the vessel's main weapons.

## DECK WEAPONS

The 88mm deck gun was often employed against merchant shipping, especially if the ship was alone and an easy target. The anti-aircraft gun mounted behind the conning tower tried to fight off Allied air attacks.

## PERISCOPES 1 AND 2

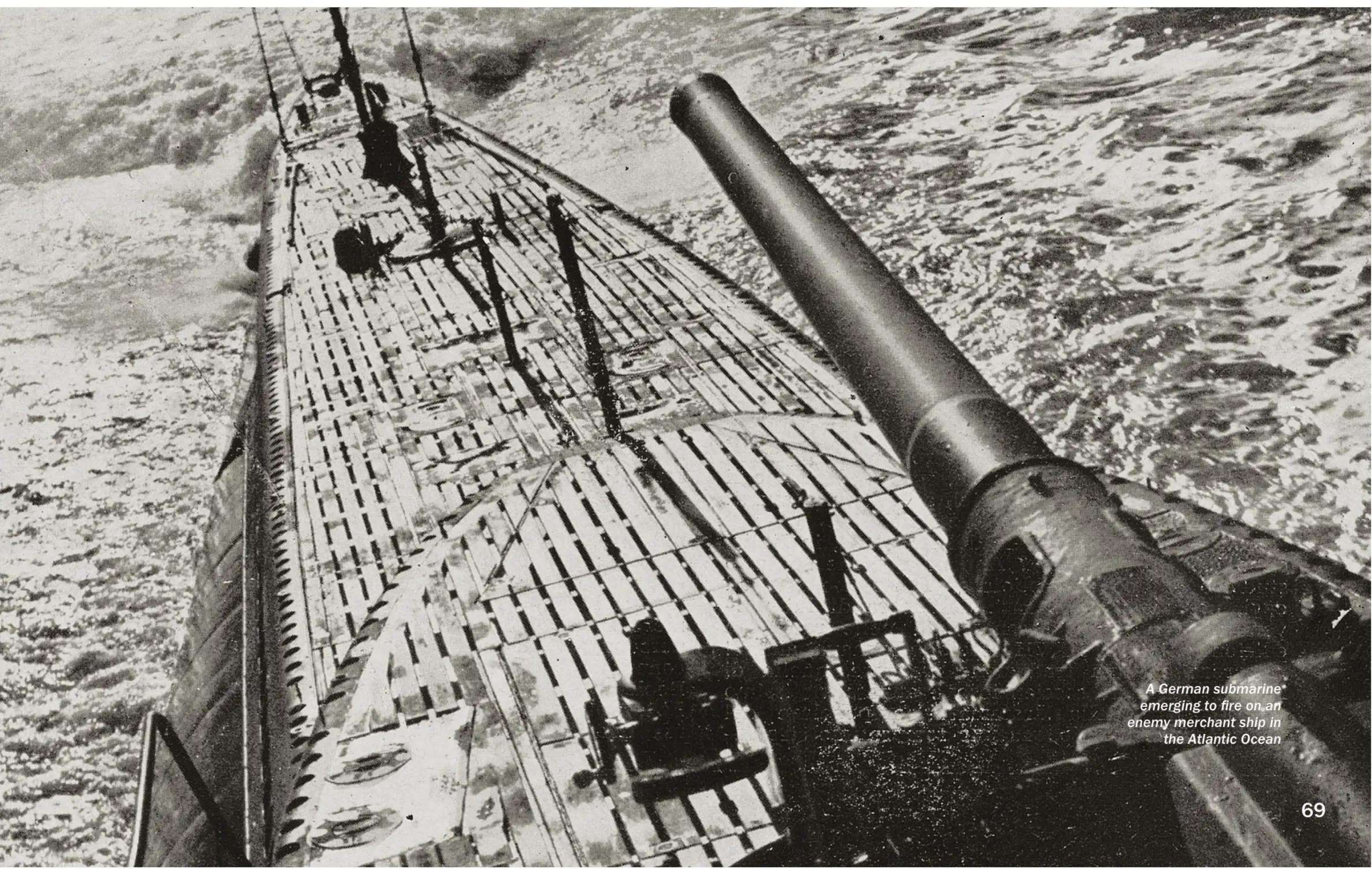
The boat's two periscopes crested the conning tower, which formed the main station for spotting Allied shipping. The control room was positioned immediately below. Men on the bridge were issued with special waterproof clothing, but this provided little protection from the waves crashing over the boat.

## RADIO ROOM

It was here that U-boats received their orders, especially important when hunting in wolfpacks. The installations featured both short and long-wave equipment.

## MAIN CREW SLEEPING QUARTERS

The majority of the crew shared bunks that were housed off the central passageway. Each cot was 1.8m (5.9ft) long and 58cm (23in) wide and carried a thin mattress. A man on duty and a man off duty shared each bunk.



A German submarine emerging to fire on an enemy merchant ship in the Atlantic Ocean



# A flawed tactic?

CRUCIAL TO THE EFFICACY OF WOLFPACK TACTICS WERE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS AND THE AVAILABILITY OF COMBAT U-BOATS. THESE ALSO PROVED ITS UNDOING. HERE ARE THREE KEY PROBLEMS WITH THE INFAMOUS RUDELTAKTIK

## 1. U-boat numbers

Dönitz's wolfpack concept relied on the capability of gathering large numbers of U-boats against a single convoy target, swamping the enemy's defences and causing havoc. However during the heady days of success the Germans still possessed insufficient numbers of Atlantic U-boats to achieve the destruction of merchant

tonnage that was the core principle of the U-boat war. There were too few U-boats for effective reconnaissance until the war was in its third year. By that time the 'old guard' of commanders were largely gone and once a convoy was found, Allied defensive tactics and technology had improved to such an extent that the original principles of surfaced attack and 'one torpedo for one ship' could be effectively countered.



*U-boat construction never kept pace with Dönitz's desires until it was too late. Here a new boat is commissioned into the Kriegsmarine at its shipyard*

## 2. HF/DF and radar

The key to gathering a wolfpack was for the contact U-boat that 'shadowed' that target to transmit regular position signals to which other U-boats were directed. The introduction of high frequency direction-finding equipment aboard an increasing number of Allied escort ships enabled escorts to frequently pinpoint the shadower and attack, at

the very least driving it underwater where it was robbed of sight, speed and the ability to transmit. Furthermore, the introduction of the Type 271 radar set in March 1941 enabled a surfaced U-boat to be detected at a range of four miles within a 360° arc of any ship so equipped. Increased escort numbers also allowed more aggressive hunting for a detected enemy who had been robbed by radar of their surface attack capability.

*Canadian frigate HMCS Swansea, the most successful U-boat hunter in the Royal Canadian Navy, equipped with Type 271 radar in its Perspex 'lighthouse' at the base of the foremast*



*The Enigma machine in operation aboard a combat U-boat*





### 3. Enigma

With improving communications equipment Dönitz was able to exercise increasingly tighter control over U-boats at sea. To efficiently coordinate a wolfpack at sea, BdU required information regarding both weather conditions and his U-boats' status. These alarmingly frequent signal requests generated a vast amount of radio traffic, encrypted in naval Enigma code. Not only vulnerable to HF/DF, these signals were also broken by Allied cryptanalysts, despite misplaced German faith in the cypher's invulnerability. Intercepted and decoded U-boat signals allowed the re-routing of convoys away from gathering wolfpacks and saved thousands of lives and hundreds and thousands of tons of shipping. Nonetheless periodic Enigma 'blackouts' were suffered by Allied intelligence due to code machine and cypher alterations, the longest – and final major gap – between February and December 1942.

he still pondered the tactical considerations of exactly how the U-boats should initially operate – as a group or scattered and summoned to a rendezvous in the event of convoy contact?

Effective reconnaissance was an important prerequisite for any attempted wolfpack operation. The patrol line became the tried and tested method by which echeloned U-boats travelled in parallel with just over two times the radius of visual distance between them. By this method they could, theoretically, comb the ocean to locate the enemy.

In reality, of course, the patrol line was subject to the detrimental effects of bad weather, faulty navigation and flawed intelligence. Aerial reconnaissance rarely became a contributing factor to U-boat success despite Dönitz's best efforts to co-operate with the Luftwaffe for this purpose. Despite eventually being granted control over the bombers of KG40, imperfect Luftwaffe maritime navigation and a lack of aircraft would serve to neuter the effort. The patrol line remained king, requiring many operational U-boats available to make it truly viable. Dönitz reasoned on needing 300 front-line boats by the time of any conflict. This number meant at any one time 100 could be outbound, 100 on station and the last 100 returning for replenishment.

Germany was nowhere near producing such numbers when war with Britain and France began in September 1939, meaning the newly promoted Kommodore Karl Dönitz went into battle with a grand total of 57 U-boats, 18 of which were available for Atlantic patrols.

### The first wolfpacks

The U-boats' opening salvos were generally directed against ships travelling solo, though British defensive convoying measures began almost immediately.

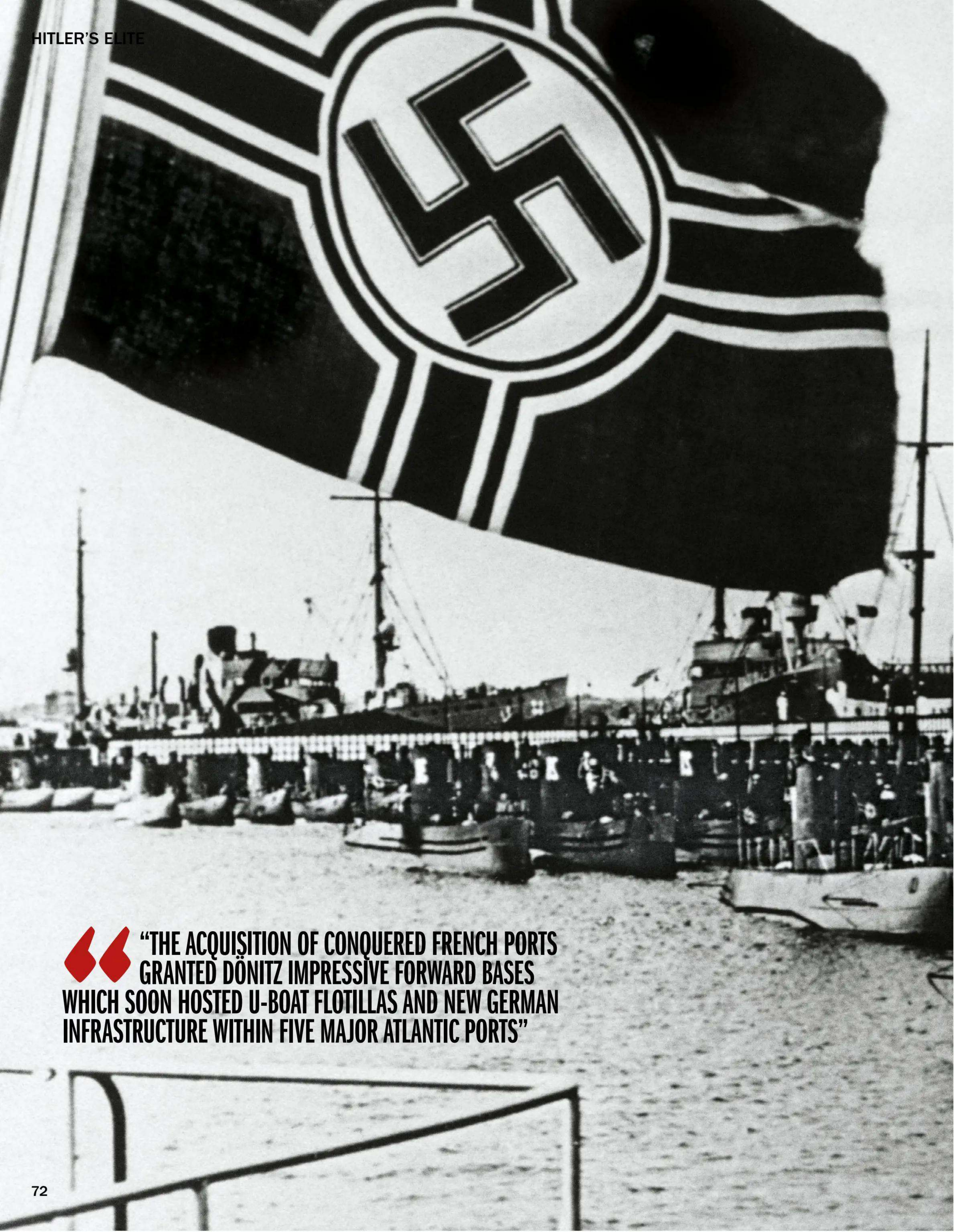
After less than a week of war Dönitz withdrew ten of his most modern Atlantic boats to prepare for his first wolfpack operation against a predicted increase in convoy traffic during October. Unfortunately his originally intended scale of attack was reduced somewhat by U-boats ordered by naval staff for special assignment or unexpected delays in dockyard repair. Ultimately, only a small force of six U-boats was available for the first attempted wolfpack. The group's tactical commander afloat would be Korvettenkapitän Werner Hartmann, senior officer of the Hundius Flotilla and skipper of U37, while Dönitz retained operational command. Hartmann would be accompanied by U40, U42, U45, U46 and U48.

"I have decided to operate the boats against Gibraltar traffic... Success will depend on the boats making a surprise appearance together. They will be ready on different dates and will therefore sail on different days and will occupy an operations area southwest of Ireland, which sinking figures so far have shown to be the best area. When all the boats have arrived there, they will receive orders to proceed... Hartmann will be in U37 as senior officer of this Atlantic group and he will, if necessary, take over control in convoy operations.

"If he finds things are not promising off Gibraltar, he will be authorised to order a new disposition, rather further from the enemy bases, along the west coast of Spain and

“INTERCEPTED AND DECODED U-BOAT SIGNALS ALLOWED THE RE-ROUTING OF CONVOYS AWAY FROM GATHERING WOLFPACKS AND SAVED THOUSANDS OF LIVES AND HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS OF TONS OF SHIPPING”





“THE ACQUISITION OF CONQUERED FRENCH PORTS GRANTED DÖNITZ IMPRESSIVE FORWARD BASES WHICH SOON HOSTED U-BOAT FLOTILLAS AND NEW GERMAN INFRASTRUCTURE WITHIN FIVE MAJOR ATLANTIC PORTS”



Portugal. Only north-south bound merchant ships would be picked up here, of course."

The results were best described as mixed. Three of the U-boats were lost as the group assembled, though none as a direct result of the pack operation. U40, the last of the group to leave port on 10 October, was sunk in a minefield east of Dover after attempting to shortcut its way to the Atlantic through the English Channel while both U42 and U45 were sunk by escorts during independent action against convoys.

The remaining three boats subsequently experienced some measure of success in a group action against convoy HG3, spotted by lookouts aboard U46 at 8.51am on 17 October. Kapitänleutnant Herbert Sohler briefly lost contact with the merchant ships before sweeping the area and reacquiring the northbound merchant ships sailing under weak escort. U46 shadowed HG3 at a distance until that afternoon when permission to attack was received. Each U-boat sank a single ship before the remainder scattered and managed to shake off pursuit.

Hartmann ordered a reconnaissance line formed, but aircraft deterred pursuit and Hartmann as tactical commander instructed the boats to move towards position 'Schwartz' off Portugal. U48, now bereft of torpedoes, was ordered home while U46, with limited fuel, achieved nothing more. U37 sank four independently sailing ships.

Though hardly an unqualified success, convoy HG3 had been successfully attacked, but six reported torpedo failures possibly prevented greater achievement. Though it was perhaps telling that both U37 and U48 had experienced far greater success independently of the group, a second wolfpack operation was to be made during the following month.

This time five U-boats were to once again assemble south of Ireland before sweeping towards Cape Finisterre. Unfortunately, this number was also whittled down to just three.

Gales off Ireland forced the boats towards the approaches to Gibraltar where they homed in on shadowing reports from U53 of a convoy northwest of El Ferrol, making contact and attacking. U49 was swiftly damaged by depth

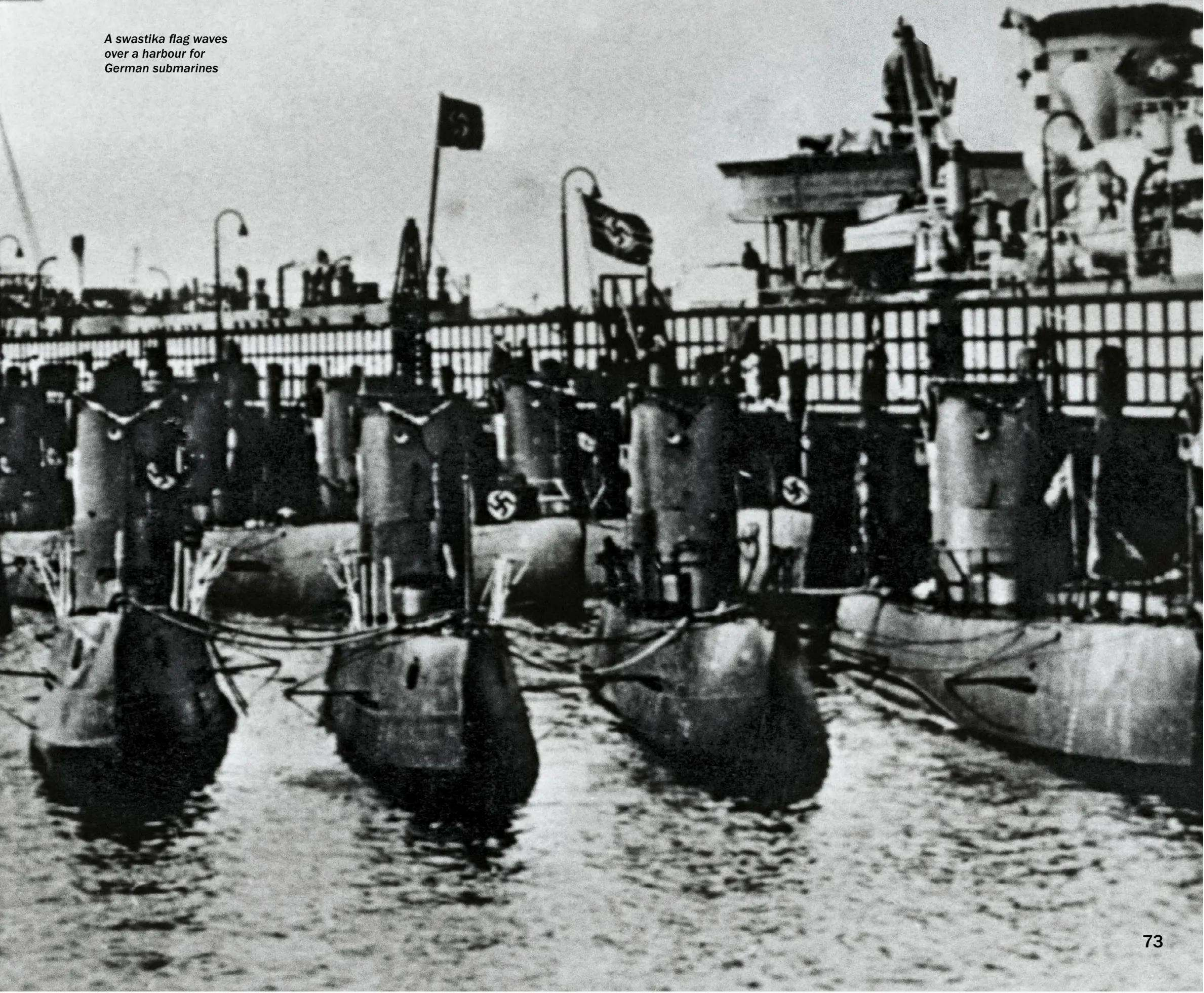
charges and forced away, while the remaining boats had no success over a three-day chase, later sinking independently sailing merchants once the group was dispersed by Dönitz. It was clear that the number of U-boats at sea was insufficient for effective wolfpack actions, while the method of control and coordination required further analysis, and Dönitz suspended further group operations.

## The wolfpacks return

Dönitz's U-boats resumed individual torpedo and minelaying missions that harvested a steady toll of British ships. The invasion of Norway in April 1940 absorbed virtually all U-boat strength and subsequent dockyard congestion delayed a return in force to the Atlantic until the end of May with the fall of France imminent.

During that month U-boat construction and the simultaneous return to service of many refitted after the Norwegian campaign finally gave Dönitz enough operational boats to attempt renewed wolfpack missions during June 1940. Kriegsmarine radio intelligence

*A swastika flag waves over a harbour for German submarines*





(B-Dienst) reported on 12 June that the heavily escorted fast convoy US3, comprising six passenger liners including the Queen Mary and Mauretania carrying 26,000 Australian and New Zealand troops, had arrived in the Freetown sea area.

Simultaneously the same intelligence source revealed detailed information about merchant convoy HX48 entering the Western Approaches and due to rendezvous with its local escort. In coded messages from Berlin, 'Group Rösing' was formed of five U-boats centred around U48 with skipper Korvettenkapitän Hans-Rudolf Rösing, senior officer of 7th U-Flotilla, as tactical commander, to intercept US3. 'Group Prien' was then assembled in a reconnaissance line of six boats through which HX48 was expected to pass with U47 and Kapitänleutnant Günther Prien in tactical command. All boats were ordered to maintain radio silence, though neither contacted their target convoys and were dispersed to resume independent operations. Although radio intelligence from the B-Dienst service continued to provide accurate and valuable information, the limited visual range of lookouts atop a low U-boat conning tower proved an insurmountable obstacle.

Meanwhile the acquisition of conquered French ports granted Dönitz impressive forward bases which soon hosted U-boat flotillas and new German infrastructure within five major Atlantic ports. French bases also increased available shipyard capacity, reduced transit time to and from the Atlantic battleground and therefore, in theory, boosting the number of combat boats at sea.

Furthermore Germany now also had possession of several powerful land-based

radio transmitters on the French Atlantic coast, most notably the very low frequency (VLF) stations at Croix Dhins and Basse Lande which augmented the existing transmitter situated in Nauen near Berlin.

Very low frequency signals were capable of transmitting one-way wireless messages to submerged U-boats, though the depth at which they could receive such signals was dependant on distance, power of the radio signal, the frequency used and salinity of the sea water. In general an absolute maximum of 20 metres could be reached before contact was lost.

The long antenna required to transmit VLF signals could not be accommodated aboard a U-boat and they were therefore unable to reciprocate a message without surfacing to transmit in high frequency.

However, this proved somewhat beneficial as U-boats were invisible to radar if submerged and impervious to Allied direction finders if not transmitting, maximising their greatest advantage – invisibility.

In the interim Dönitz, now headquartered in 18 Boulevard Souchet, Paris, had further refined his wolfpack tactics. With the increased radio capability, he believed that the U-boats were best coordinated from the land headquarters. A tactical commander afloat was no longer considered necessary and had proved inefficient in the past as the tactical leader's boat had sometimes been compelled to dive by enemy escorts, immediately leaving the remaining U-boats leaderless. Constant tactical control from the situation room at BdU remained the logical solution.

Furthermore Dönitz's new doctrine relied on the contacting U-boat to shadow its convoy

without attacking while BdU coordinated the deployment of other boats to form the wolfpack at sea. Cooperation between the U-boats themselves was maintained by visual signals if possible, or radio watches on a pre-arranged shortwave frequency. BdU would re-transmit at fixed times any messages received from U-boats, allowing all in a group to maintain an overall view of each other's movements. Once in position, BdU would grant permission to attack, with each skipper then acting independently once the action had begun.

With many British destroyers held back in home waters to counter the threat of German invasion, escort numbers decreased, providing fortuitous timing for Dönitz as he opened a new wave of wolfpack attacks in 1940. Success grew exponentially. In September Prien's U47 found HX72 while on weather reporting duty and low on ammunition at the end of a successful patrol. As he shadowed Dönitz quickly assembled the experienced skippers of U99, U48, U65, U38, U43, U32 and U100 to attack and together they sank 11 of the 41 merchant ships at no loss to themselves. It was a good beginning but it would be the following month that the pinnacle of wolfpack achievement was reached.

After briefly being sighted by U48 on the night of 16 October, the slow SC7 convoy of heavily laden merchants shook its shadower free before being reacquired by U38 the following day. The convoy had left Nova Scotia eleven days previously bound for Liverpool, a planned speed of 8 knots reduced after many older, smaller vessels proved incapable of this pace.

Thirty-five merchant ships departed Canada, but almost immediately some straggled as bad weather separated them from the main



Teaching the principles of attack. A Knight's Cross-holding veteran instructs officer candidates in the art of convoy attacks



Kapitän zur See Karl Dönitz watches flotilla exercises from the U-boat depot ship Saar

First World War U-boats nearly severed Britain's maritime trade during 1917 but could not counter British defensive convoying when introduced



# Goliath and the Grid

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS REMAINED A CORNERSTONE OF THE WOLFPACK PRINCIPLE, AS DID NAVIGATION AND LOCATION TECHNOLOGY

Rather than relying on standard latitude and longitude positioning for global positioning the Kriegsmarine – like the Luftwaffe and Army – developed their own charts using a grid reference system. The world's oceans were divided into major areas, generally square though sometimes irregularly shaped near land masses. Each of these large areas was identified by a two-letter code (eg AE, CD, EH etc), and further subdivided into a three by three matrix of nine squares, in turn subdivided twice again by the same method.

Further complicating the chart for enemy intelligence, these were produced using the standard Mercator's projection, meaning that squares covering the same actual area became smaller as they neared the equator. This grid chart, which was both complex to decipher for the Allies and simple to use for those in possession of it, allowed precise navigational

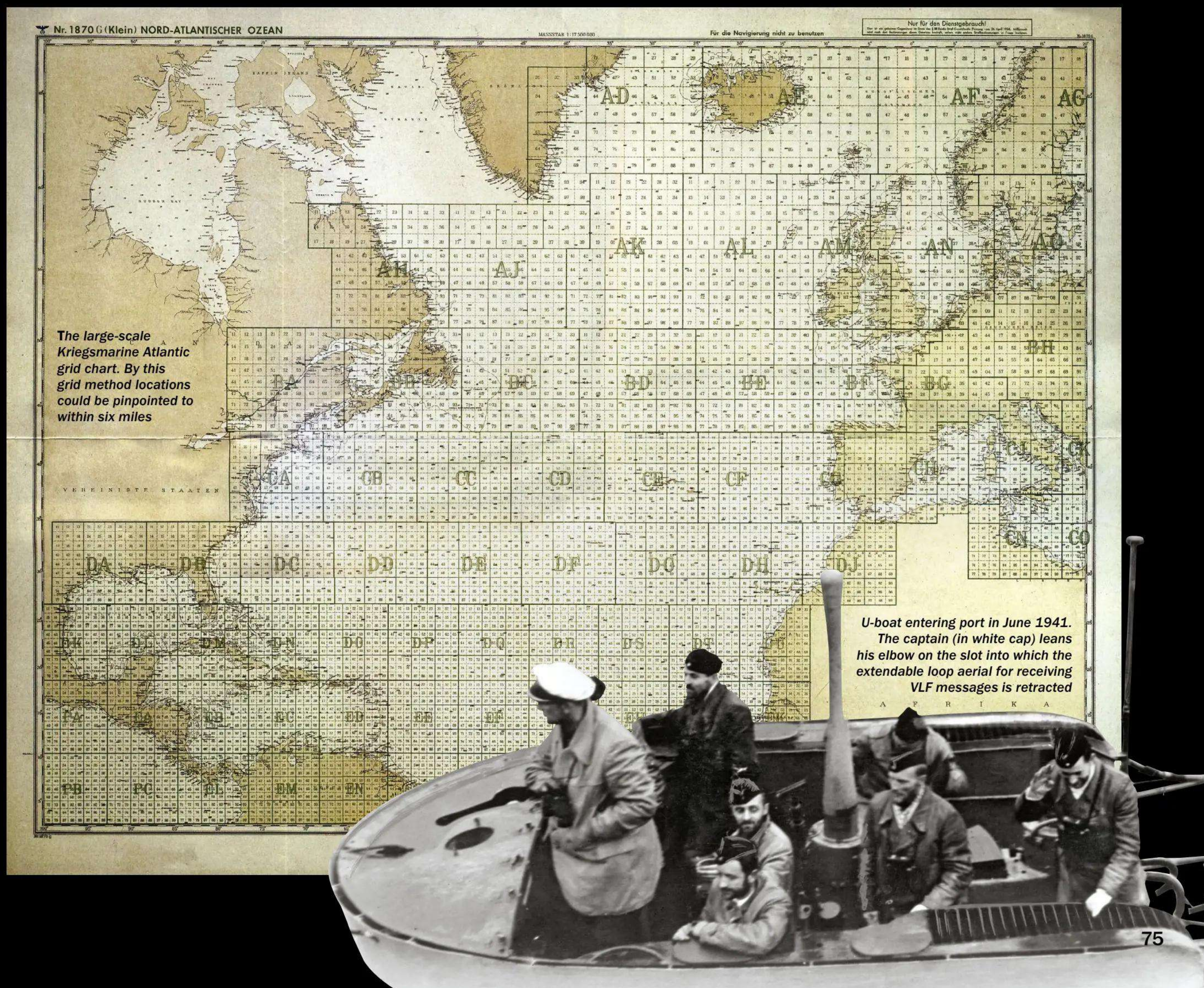
points to be located within an error margin of six miles. For example the location CG9575 would place a U-boat at the entrance of the Strait of Gibraltar.

Such precise navigational instructions were transmitted to U-boats from BdU operations and to complement the installations at Nauen and on the French Atlantic coast, from 1943 to the war's end the U-boat service utilised the most powerful transmitter of its time. Its antenna required an area of three square kilometres

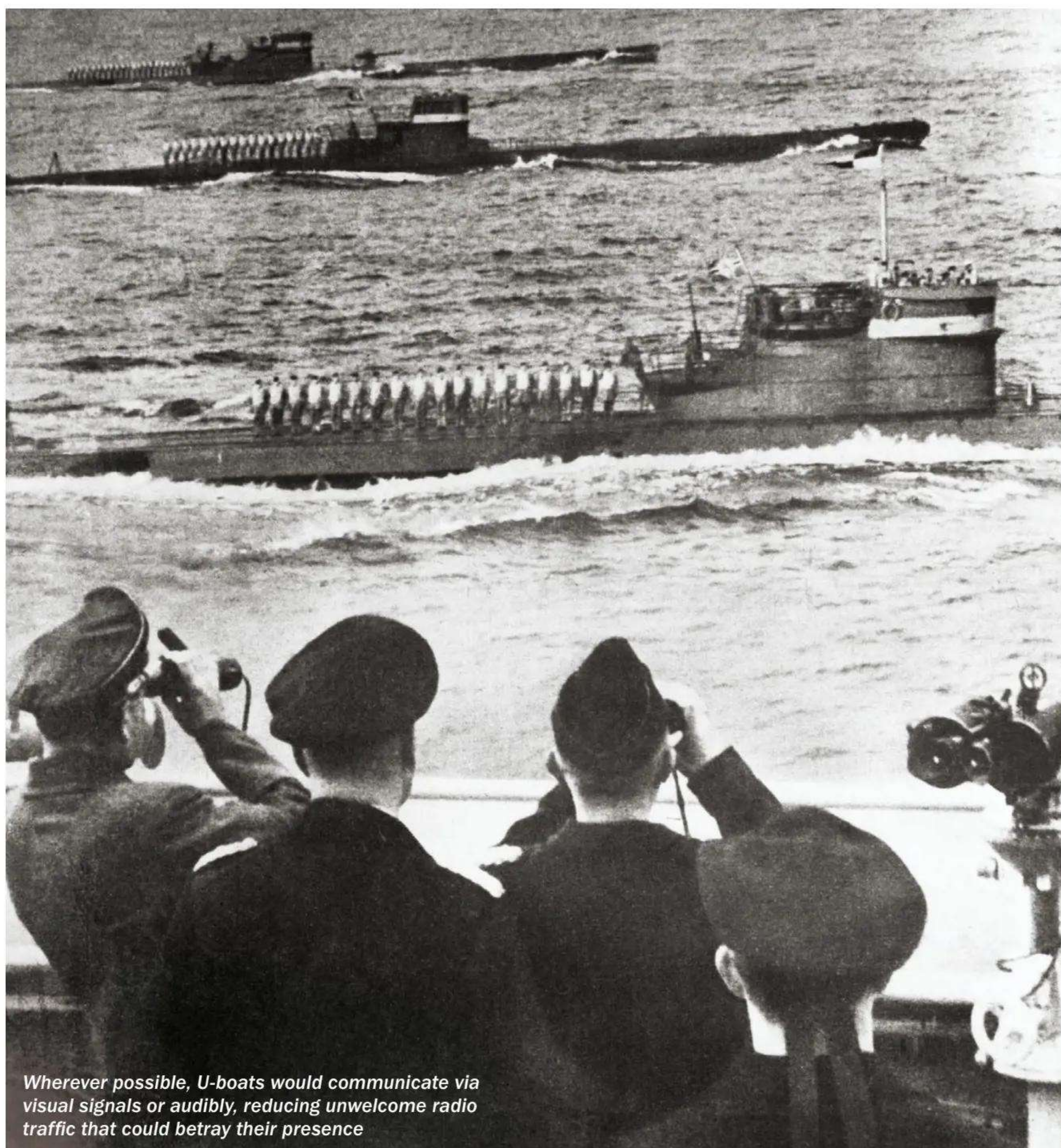
“FROM 1943 TO THE WAR'S END THE U-BOAT SERVICE UTILISED THE MOST POWERFUL TRANSMITTER OF ITS TIME”

and therefore could not be accommodated at Nauen, constructed instead near Kalbe in central Germany. Named 'Goliath' its VLF transmissions could be received by submerged U-boats within the Caribbean and Indian Oceans by their use of an extendible loop antenna which functioned underwater while the U-boat could maintain a top speed of 8 knots.

However, by the time that Goliath entered service the Rudeltaktik had nearly been defeated by Allied naval technology, tactics and aircraft. In March 1943 Dönitz concentrated 44 U-boats against convoys HX229 and SC122, 16 of them sinking 22 ships for the loss of a single U-boat in a near perfect pack attack. Just two months later, energised Allied escort forces repulsed repeated group attacks and 41 U-boats were destroyed. Conceding defeat with such unsustainable losses, Dönitz was forced to finally withdraw his Atlantic wolfpacks.







Wherever possible, U-boats would communicate via visual signals or audibly, reducing unwelcome radio traffic that could betray their presence

body and two subsequently sank while sailing alone. A pair of Royal Navy sloops and a single corvette were in escort as the first torpedoes hit. Dönitz had gathered U38, U46, U48, U99, U100, U101 and U123 as SC7 sailed directly into the U-boat patrol line. Within three nights one of the bloodiest convoy battles of the war was fought and resulted in unmitigated disaster for the Allies. In total they lost 20 merchant ships, with a further two damaged, and in return experienced no success against the attacking U-boats. One hundred and forty-one merchant sailors were killed in what the German newspapers quickly dubbed 'The Night of the Long Knives'. Action was broken off as the shattered remnants of SC7 reached the comparative safety of the North Channel. While some U-boats already departed after exhausting their torpedoes, others diverted to strike convoy HX79, which also lost 12 ships and two others damaged before the attackers ran completely out of ammunition.

## The 'Happy Time'

The wolfpack theory that Dönitz had nurtured since his own days in combat was finally fully vindicated. Nonetheless, challenges remained. The nautical area required to enable surfaced U-boats to assemble an effective patrol line had moved the boats further west into the Atlantic Ocean away from the heavily patrolled and constricted North Channel and its approach

to Liverpool. This placed expected convoy interception points in the open ocean, also allowing them to effectively reroute around any detected U-boat concentration. Locating the convoys became perhaps the biggest problem for the wolfpacks with negligible Luftwaffe assistance and too few Atlantic U-boats.

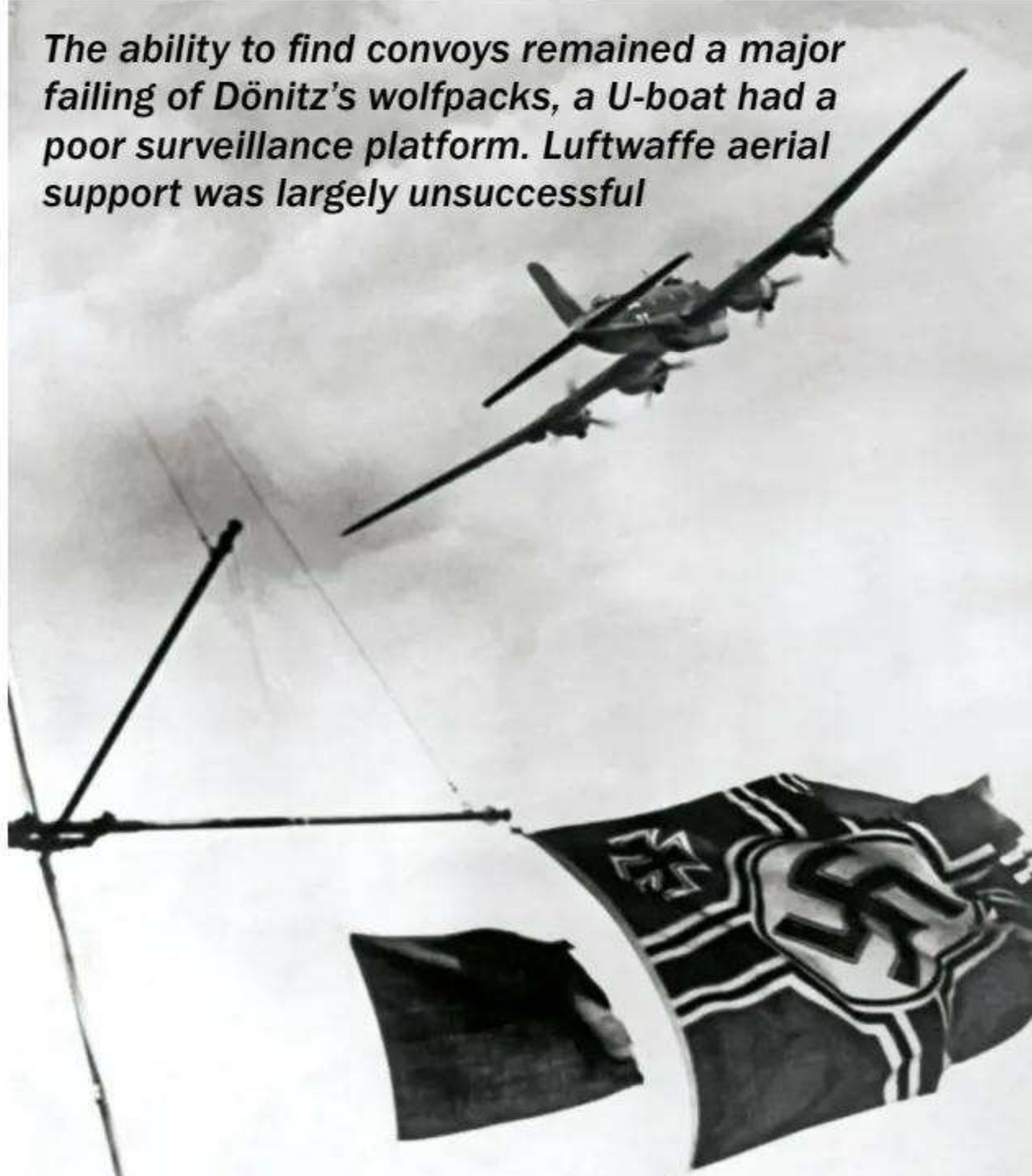
Nonetheless the period between July 1940 and March 1941 when the wolfpacks truly began to bite has often been referred to as the 'Happy Time' for U-boat crews. But at least one of the veterans involved recalled this entire period in a completely different light.

Otto Kretschmer, the highest 'scoring' U-boat ace of the Second World War remembered, "The 'Happy Time.' I don't like this term. We were the first ones to probe the defences of the enemy and this was not a happy time because 50 per cent of our forces perished. I remember when I was with U99 and went into the Atlantic for the first time, I found out that before me there were six submarines sent to the Atlantic and three were sunk. Fifty per cent losses. So, this is called the 'Happy Time'? I don't know why. And, of course, we had been trained during peace time and we had to discover whether the peace time tactics were any good for war, which they were not at all times... The 'Happy Time' had been invented by Propaganda Kompanie in Germany; they were the first to speak about it."

Though undoubtedly a sound tactical doctrine, the real success of the wolfpacks primarily resulted from the tenacity and



Werner Hartmann (in white cap), pictured here late in the war as commander of U198, was tactical commander of the first attempted wolfpack



The ability to find convoys remained a major failing of Dönitz's wolfpacks, a U-boat had a poor surveillance platform. Luftwaffe aerial support was largely unsuccessful

bravery of the U-boat commanders at a time when Allied defences were undeveloped and understrength. 'Aces' such as Kretschmer, Joachim Schepke (U99), Günther Prien (U47) and Herbert Schültze (U48) piloted their U-boats at speed inside the convoy body, running surfaced and firing to left and right.

This fearless aggression sank dozens of Allied ships, but it was soon exhausted by veteran commanders transferred to larger ocean-going long-distance U-boats, moved ashore to train the next generation of skippers, or lost in action.

In March 1941, three of those most famous U-boat skippers – Kretschmer, Prien and Schepke – were all lost. Although the wolfpacks were far from defeated and their depredations of Allied shipping would continue, the real 'Happy Time' of the wolfpacks was already over. While they continued to operate until 1943, they would rarely achieve such convincing results as during the latter half of 1940.

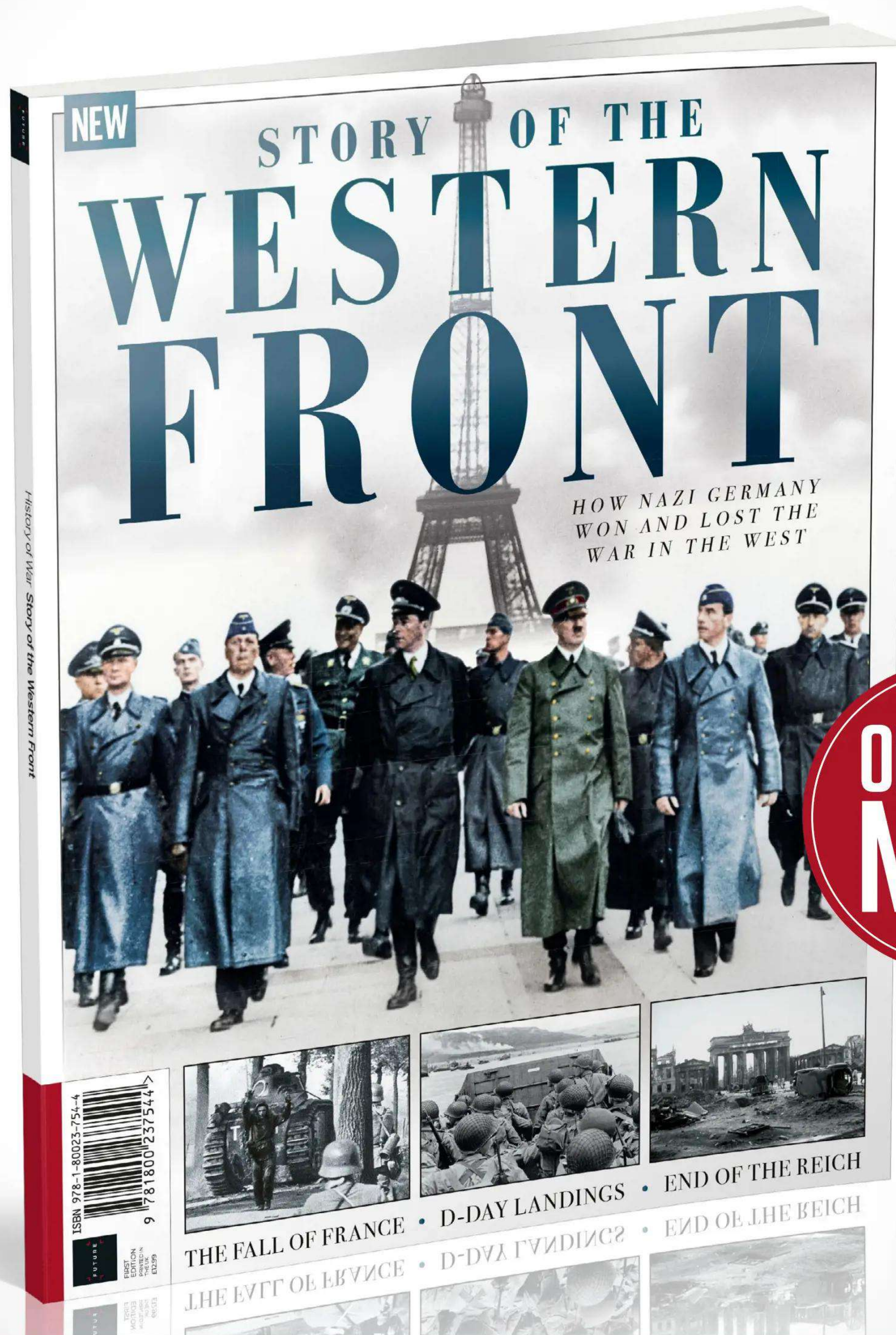
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- ★ PATERSON, LAWRENCE, **SECOND U-BOAT FLOTILLA**, PEN & SWORD, 2002



# IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE STRUGGLE TO FREE THE WEST FROM NAZI RULE

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# ROMMEL'S AFRIKA KORPS



This widely lauded German force was among the few unblemished by brutality – but what was life like serving under Hitler's Desert Fox?

**O**n 6 February 1941, General Erwin Rommel found a few minutes to write a letter to his wife. He and Lucie had been married for almost 25 years, and Germany's most dashing general liked to keep her abreast with his news. "Things are moving fast," wrote Rommel, who mentioned he had met Adolf Hitler earlier in the day. "I can only take the barest necessities with me. Perhaps I'll be able to get the rest out soon. I need not tell you how my head is swimming with all the many things that are to be done." The letter ended with a lament from Rommel that his brief leave with his wife had been cut short. "Don't be sad," he wrote. "The new job is very big and important."

Rommel spent the following days in a whirlwind of preparation and planning for his 'new job'. There was no other option. Hitler had appointed him commander of the newly formed Afrika Korps, raised as a direct consequence of Britain's crushing victory over the Italians in North Africa in December 1940.

When Rommel's aircraft touched down at Tripoli on 12 February, he was determined to drive the British out of North Africa. As the first German units began arriving at the city's harbour, he insisted that the 6,000-ton transport ship was unloaded in record time so that he could get his soldiers up to the front with all possible haste. "The men received their tropical kit early next morning," wrote their general. "They radiated complete assurance of victory, and the change of atmosphere did not pass unnoticed in Tripoli."





*This propaganda picture  
was taken in February  
1943, just a few months  
before the surrender of  
the Afrika Korps*





The month after the first elements of the Afrika Korps disembarked at Tripoli, thousands of kilometres north in Saxony, an 18-year-old conscript was reporting for his first day of 16 weeks of basic infantry training. Rudolf Schneider came from Stauchitz, a village in the flat farmland between Leipzig and Dresden, and had studied agriculture at college before the outbreak of war.

His infantry training complete, Schneider was posted to North Africa in early 1942 to join the Afrika Korps. "When I arrived in Libya, I was interviewed by an officer," recalled Schneider. "They sent me to the Kampfstaffel, General Rommel's personal combat unit of nearly 400 men, which was commanded by Rudolph Kiehl."

Kiehl had served under Rommel in 1939 in the Führer-Begleit-Batallion, Adolf Hitler's bodyguard unit, and the Kampfstaffel served a similar purpose to the Afrika Korps' commander in North Africa.

"I was selected for the Kampfstaffel because I knew a lot about British and American vehicles," said Schneider. "As part of my education I had learned how to drive English and American tractors and trucks, and the fact I spoke English was also a factor."

Schneider arrived in Libya at the moment Rommel's supply problems were coming to a head. In March 1942, the Afrika Korps took delivery of 18,000 tons of supplies, 42,000 tons fewer than he estimated his army required for victory in North Africa. He also received a few thousand additional men to augment

**“DUBBED THE DESERT FOX, HIS RESOURCEFULNESS, FEARLESSNESS AND WILLINGNESS TO SHARE THE SAME HARDSHIPS AS HIS MEN ENDEARED HIM TO THE AFRIKA KORPS”**

his three German divisions, but demands for additional formations were refused because Berlin's priority was the Eastern Front.

In the year or so between the Afrika Korps arriving in Libya and Schneider's posting to North Africa, the Desert War had witnessed a series of fierce, bloody battles with neither side able to land a knockout blow. Rommel had enjoyed the most recent success, an offensive in February that saw the Allies pushed back to a defensive position running south from Gazala to Bir Hacheim. The Gazala Line, as it was known, had been occupied a few months earlier by the Afrika Korps. However, a British offensive dislodged them in November/December 1941.

It was characteristic of the Desert War, a fluid conflict that ranged back and forth across Libya, in which armour was crucial. Rommel had shown his genius for armoured warfare as commander of the 7th Panzer Division during the invasion of France in 1940, but in Libya he quickly realised that mass tank battles were futile. Instead, he deployed his 88mm anti-aircraft guns as anti-tank guns, using them to destroy the enemy's armour before sending his panzers forward to wreak havoc on the exposed artillery and infantry.

The boldness of Rommel (who was promoted to field marshal in June 1942) soon became legendary. Dubbed the Desert Fox, his resourcefulness, fearlessness and willingness to share the same hardships as his men, endeared him to the Afrika Korps. He wasn't a commander who inspired love in his men; he was too brusque and abrasive for that. Instead he inspired confidence.

Rudolf Schneider soon learned what sort of man his commander was when he was selected as one of Rommel's drivers. "When I drove him he rarely talked and obviously I was very intimidated by him," reflected Schneider. "I was just a young soldier driving a general. He was not a man for small talk, not with me or anyone. If he asked a question, he wanted an answer, brief and concise. If you talked too long, he would tell you to shut up."

**Clockwise from below:** – A Bantam jeep in the hands of two Afrika Korps soldiers  
– Schneider recalls that while they liked their caps, the they were jealous of the Eighth Army's lightweight uniform  
– Rommel, second from right, seen inspecting some of his men in the summer of 1942  
– The Kampfstaffel at rest. Neither the SAS nor the LRDG ever used tents when on operations in the desert

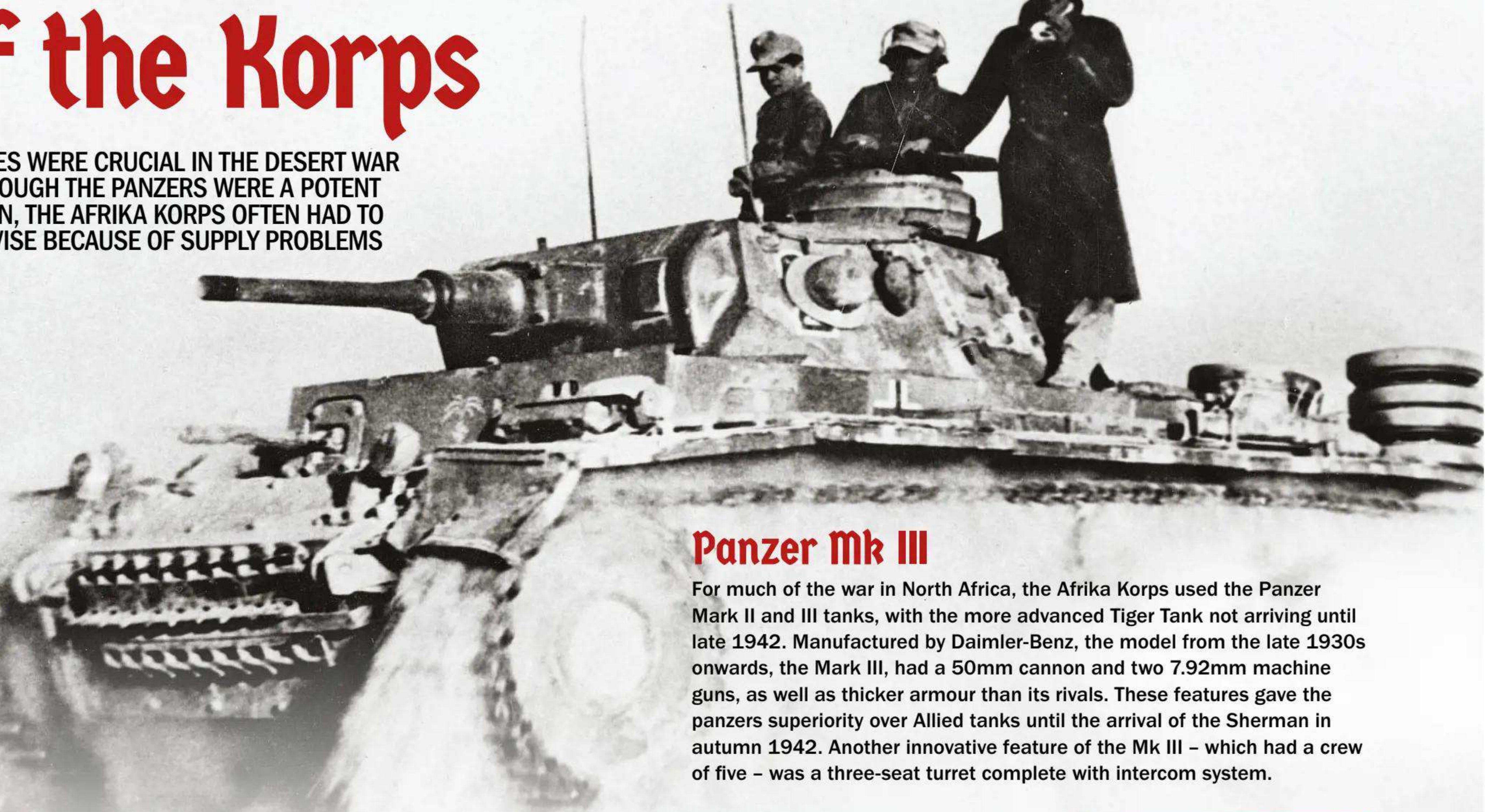




# Machines of the Korps

*A Panzer III F model, advances across the Western Desert during the Gazala campaign, June 1942*

VEHICLES WERE CRUCIAL IN THE DESERT WAR AND THOUGH THE PANZERS WERE A POTENT WEAPON, THE AFRIKA KORPS OFTEN HAD TO IMPROVISE BECAUSE OF SUPPLY PROBLEMS



## Panzer Mk III

For much of the war in North Africa, the Afrika Korps used the Panzer Mark II and III tanks, with the more advanced Tiger Tank not arriving until late 1942. Manufactured by Daimler-Benz, the model from the late 1930s onwards, the Mark III, had a 50mm cannon and two 7.92mm machine guns, as well as thicker armour than its rivals. These features gave the panzers superiority over Allied tanks until the arrival of the Sherman in autumn 1942. Another innovative feature of the Mk III – which had a crew of five – was a three-seat turret complete with intercom system.

“THE SAS BEGAN USING JEEPS IN THE DESERT IN 1942 AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS WAS EVIDENT TO THE AFRIKA KORPS, WHO AVIDLY USED ANY OF THE AMERICAN-MADE VEHICLES THEY CAPTURED”

## Willys Bantams jeep

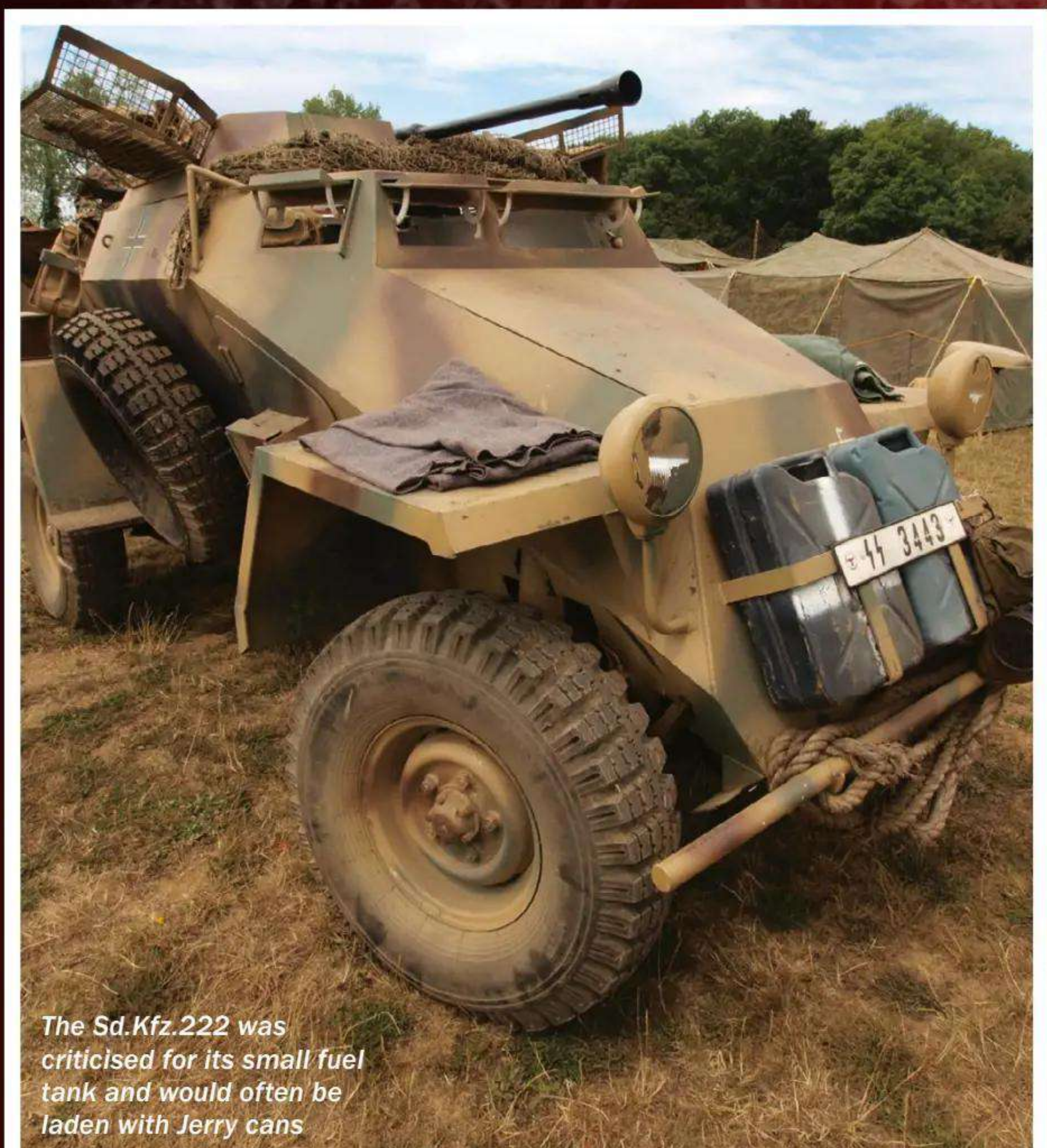
The SAS began using Jeeps in the desert in 1942 and their effectiveness was evident to the Afrika Korps, who avidly used any of the American-made vehicles they captured. Fitted with heavy machine gun mountings, the Jeeps had a payload of 270 kilograms and a maximum range of approximately 400 kilometres on a single tank of fuel.



*Rudolf Schneider is seen here digging out his Willys jeep*

## Sd.Kfz.222 reconnaissance car

The Sd.Kfz.222 was an armoured reconnaissance car that was effective because of its armament – a 20mm cannon and machine gun in its open turret – and performance. With its rear-mounted 90 horsepower liquid-cooled engine, the vehicle was capable of reaching 69 kilometres per hour on roads. It was also known for its durability.



*The Sd.Kfz.222 was criticised for its small fuel tank and would often be laden with Jerry cans*



"I wouldn't say he was arrogant but he believed in himself too much as a commander. He didn't ask the opinion of his other officers, he had great confidence in his own decisions... and some German officers didn't like Rommel."

Schneider also remembered his commander as, "...a very straight and correct officer... he didn't fear anything and we, the soldiers, respected him."

Rommel's rectitude was one reason why the North African campaign is remembered as the only 'clean' theatre of the war, inasmuch as any war can be 'clean'. The other reason was the absence of SS units or the Gestapo. "I never saw any Nazis the whole time I served in the Afrika Korps," recalled Schneider. "In the Kampfstaffel, our conduct had to be exemplary. One time, I think in Bouerat (a town in western Libya), a German soldier, not from my unit, raped a local woman. Rommel had him shot and the firing squad came from my unit – 12 men but only six of the rifles had live rounds."

Schneider glimpsed Rommel's 'correctness' at first hand, not long after joining the Kampfstaffel. Having driven Rommel to inspect some tank positions, Schneider alerted his commander to the approach of a vehicle. As it neared, they saw through the dust it was a British ambulance. "I was on my rounds and accidentally ran my ambulance into a German tank position," remembered Alex Franks of the 7th Armoured Company. "I was terrified."

Schneider estimated there were about 20 members of the Kampfstaffel, as well as Rommel, speaking English. They ordered Franks out of the vehicle. "He came out with 20 rifles pointed at him and Rommel said 'Stand to



Two members of the Kampfstaffel on a captured LRDG radio truck. The soldier on the left is trying out the Vickers K

attention, you are in front of a German general'," recalled Schneider. "Rommel then asked him where he came from. Alex told him he was an ambulance driver who had lost his way. Rommel asked if he had a compass and Alex said that he didn't." The ambulance was searched for weapons but there were none, and Rommel then asked Franks his destination. It was a hospital but Franks was way off the beaten track. "Rommel pointed him in the right direction and off he went," recalled Schneider. Franks survived the war and met Schneider in 2009.

Rommel had been inspecting his tank positions as part of preparations for a major offensive against the British positions along the Gazala Line. The aim of this was to capture Tobruk, the Libyan port that had remained

stubbornly in Allied hands throughout the fluctuations of the Desert War.

The offensive began on 26 May 1942, with the Italian infantry launching a frontal assault on the British and South African troops holding the Gazala Line. Rommel had held a poor opinion of his Latin allies since arriving in Libya in February 1941. Within a few weeks, his adjutant, Major Schraepler, was writing to Rommel's wife about the deficiencies of the Italians: "They either do not come forward at all, or if they do, they run at the first shot," he explained. "If an Englishman so much as comes in sight, their hands go up."

Schneider didn't share this view of Germany's ally. "The Italian soldier was a very good soldier but very badly treated," he said. "The Italian

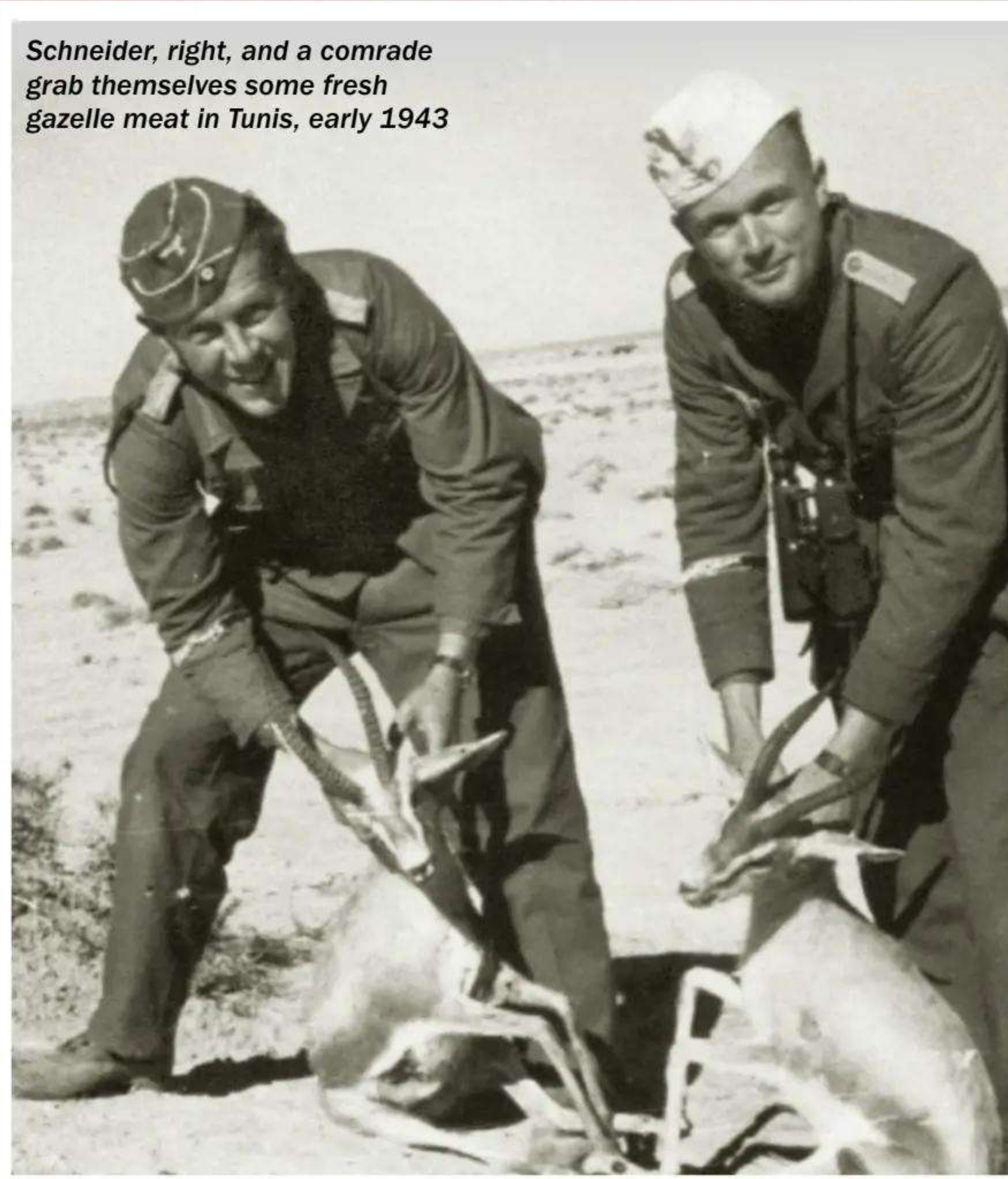
# Life in the Kampfstaffel

## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS WAS A FORGOTTEN TANK ENGAGEMENT THAT INADVERTENTLY CHANGED THE COURSE OF WWII

Born in April 1923 in rural eastern Germany, Rudolf Schneider enrolled at the German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture in Witzhausen in the 1930s. His dream was to farm in south west Africa (present day Namibia), but in 1941, shortly after his 18th birthday, Schneider was drafted into the army. He underwent basic training in Dresden before being shipped to North Africa in early 1942 to join the newly formed Afrika Korps. Once in Libya, his knowledge of British and American vehicles – gained at agricultural college – proved so valuable that he was selected to join the Kampfstaffel, Rommel's reconnaissance/bodyguard force of nearly 400 soldiers. "I was one of Rommel's drivers," said Schneider. "I was chosen because I knew English and could operate their equipment. I also had a good memory for landscapes, which was important in the desert. We would drive long distances and all you would see was stones and sand, stones and sand." Schneider was captured in May 1943 and sent to the USA, where he spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Camp Swift, Texas. He spent many of his days as a prisoner picking cotton for five cents an hour. After the war, Schneider returned to Europe, but the British, discovering he had been a member of Rommel's Kampfstaffel, detained him when his ship arrived in Liverpool. He spent three years working as a farm labourer in Staffordshire. He finally returned to then East Germany in 1948, and married his childhood sweetheart, who had waited for him.

“ONCE IN LIBYA, HIS KNOWLEDGE OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN VEHICLES PROVED SO VALUABLE THAT HE WAS SELECTED TO JOIN THE KAMPFSTAFFEL”

Schneider, right, and a comrade grab themselves some fresh gazelle meat in Tunis, early 1943





“IT HAD BEEN AGREED IN EARLY 1941 THAT THE ITALIANS WOULD SUPPLY THE AFRIKA KORPS WITH RATIONS, WHICH THEY DID, BUT WHAT THEY PROVIDED WAS BARELY FIT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION”

officers had special food and the soldiers had poorer food. The Italian officers had brothels but not the soldiers. The officers in general had a better standard of living. In the Afrika Korps, officers and men had the same food and shared the same conditions.”

One source of simmering discontent between the Germans and the Italians concerned rations. Schneider recalled that, “Italian officers didn’t like Rommel because... there wasn’t much trust.” The antipathy was reciprocated by the German commander and his men, all of whom blamed the Italian high command for the poor quality of their rations. It had been agreed in early 1941 that the Italians would supply the Afrika Korps with rations, which they did, but what they provided was barely fit for human consumption. “This was one of the reasons we didn’t believe in the Italians, they didn’t keep their word [about rations],” explains Schneider. “They had a lot of fresh oranges, and we didn’t get any.”

Instead, the Afrika Korps received tins of preserved meat, on which were stamped the initials AM. They stood for ‘Amministrazione Militare’ but the Italian soldiers and their German counterparts preferred ‘Asinus Mussolini’ (Mussolini’s arse). Another source of complaint

for the Germans was the hard black bread.

Yet despite their resentment with the rations, the Afrika Korps ate what they received with characteristic stoicism. It was one of the features of the Korps, a discipline and camaraderie nurtured in the German Army’s training, underpinned by the classlessness of National Socialism.

Schneider confirmed the view. “In the Kampfstaffel, the men came from everywhere: Saxony, Bavaria, Prussia or, in Rommel’s case, Swabia, in south west Germany. No one region dominated and there were no factions. We all got on.”

German military training also placed an emphasis on always making ground as a team, a mobility that was interdependent and interchangeable across the army so that an infantryman, tankman, artilleryman and engineer all had an implicit trust in one another’s role. This instilled in the German soldier a confidence and adaptability that was absent from their British counterparts.

Broad as the parameters of the Afrika Korps’ training were, they didn’t allow officers

to go outside of this framework, unlike the British, who possessed a type of officer more innovative and imaginative than most on the German side. Two such men were David Stirling, founder of the Special Air Service (SAS), and Ralph Bagnold, who, in June 1940, raised the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG).

There were sound military reasons why Rommel never formed a special forces unit to rival that of the SAS and LRDG, notably the constant fuel constraints and the fact that the British military installations were less remote and better guarded. Ultimately, however, it



*Above: An M40 steel helmet of the Afrika Korps. These were fitted with ventilation holes to help with the baking heat*



*Another German propaganda image shows a heavily armed Afrika Korps patrol. Note the scorpion symbol on the bonnet*



## HITLER'S ELITE

*With dust and sandstorms a regular occurrence, some soldiers went to extreme lengths to protect their faces*



was because the German military mind was predicated on organisation and not innovation. "It is true that we didn't have the initiative of the British," said Schneider. "We were trained to fight and think as a team not as individuals."

Additionally, the Afrika Korps was more wary of the desert than the LRDG. Ralph Bagnold was an eminent desert explorer in the 1920s, as were several other LRDG officers. They had accumulated a knowledge and respect for the environment that gave them a confidence – although crucially not an over-confidence – to penetrate into the heart of the desert, while the Afrika Korps preferred to keep close to the coastal regions. "We knew the LRDG were situated around Siwa (oasis) but we were told to keep our distance," remembered Schneider. "We didn't like to go too far into the desert, because if we were wounded, there would be no one who would come and help us. Occasionally we saw LRDG patrols, but we had instructions not to go after them."

Nonetheless, when the Axis forces launched their offensive on 26 May 1942, Rommel led his Afrika Korps south into the desert, while the Italians attacked the Gazala Line. In effect, the German commander was throwing a right hook at the Allies, sweeping round the French garrison in Bir Hacheim and attacking the British behind the Gazala line. "We drove south of Bir Hacheim and then came at the Gazala

Line from the east," recalled Schneider. "He (Rommel) said we would break the Line from the rear. During the day we laid up, hiding our vehicles because the RAF controlled the skies, and so we drove only at night... Rommel led us. He did the navigating. We didn't know where we were going. He just ordered us to follow him."

For three days the Axis and Allied armour fought, while the First Free French Brigade held out at Bir Hacheim. Rommel recalled on 28 May that, "...British tanks opened fire on my command post, which was located close beside the Kampfstaffel and our vehicles. Shells fell all around us and the windscreen of our command omnibus flew into fragments."

Schneider's hand and stomach were peppered with shrapnel: flesh wounds mostly, not enough to take him out of the battle. But the intensity of the British resistance caused Rommel to order his Afrika Korps to pull back and form a defensive position called 'The Cauldron'. The British drove on, confident that a victory was within their grasp, but the Afrika Korps, despite losing some 200 tanks in four days of fighting, countered with the German 88mm anti-tank guns, inflicting a heavy toll on the British armour. On 10 June, Bir Hacheim fell and three days later the British armour was defeated on 'Black Saturday'.

The Eighth Army retreated from the Gazala Line, withdrawing all the way to El Alamein

in what became known as the 'Gazala Gallop'. On 21 June, Tobruk finally fell to the Germans, along with about 35,000 British and Commonwealth troops. Schneider remembered the fall of Tobruk as a "wonderful" moment – not because of the victory but because of the British rations. "We had lived for months on this heavy black bread and these awful Italian rations. Suddenly we found fresh fruit and vegetables, even strawberry jam."

Life in North Africa was unquestionably tougher for the Afrika Korps than for their enemies. The Allies were well supplied and were also able to rest and recuperate in sophisticated cities with delights on offer that the German forces could only dream of. "Unlike the British, who had Alexandria and Cairo, which were full of restaurants and bars and other things, we had no cities like that," reflected Schneider. "So the opportunity to escape from the war for a few days wasn't possible." Even in the few towns that were in their hands, such as Benghazi and El Agheila, "...it was forbidden, on the orders of Rommel, to enter a restaurant where Italian soldiers were, and we would be punished if we disobeyed him."

There were other spoils of war to be had in Tobruk, aside from strawberry jam. "We captured field guns and tanks – Matildas and also some Stuarts – and some command vehicles," said Schneider. "We started to use



those but we preferred to use our own small arms, the 98k carbine and MP40 (Schmeisser), which were good weapons." By the summer of 1942, 85 per cent of the Afrika Korps' transport consisted of vehicles manufactured in Britain and America.

In his memoir of the Desert War, *Alamein*, Major Paolo Caccia-Dominioni, an Italian engineer, wrote that: "Captain Kiel [sic], the commander of Rommel's Kampfstaffel, invented a new sport for the entertainment of his men: tall and fair as they were, dressed in British khaki, bare-headed in accordance with the fashion current in both armies, driving captured vehicles that still bore their original markings. They would infiltrate among the enemy rearguard, tag along quietly for a while – and then suddenly reveal their true identity with the merry rattle of machine-gun fire! Any number of prisoners had been rounded up in this way."

While Schneider agreed that they did indeed use the captured Allied vehicles, he dismissed the idea they wore the enemy's uniform. "It was strictly forbidden to put on any part of the British uniform," he said. "But we actually liked the British uniform in the desert because it was light. Our uniform was cotton but it was heavier than what the British had to wear, although we liked our caps."

On 23 June, Rommel's men crossed the Libyan border on the heels of the retreating British Eighth Army. Six days later, the Kampfstaffel and the 90 Light Division entered Mersa Matruh. The Allies' last coastal fortress was now in German hands but it would be the last decisive success of Rommel's campaign. On 3 July, Rommel wrote to his wife that, "...resistance is too great and our strength exhausted."

The Afrika Korps had sent the Allies fleeing back into Egypt, but they had reached the end of their supply line and of their endurance.

"After we took Tobruk, we got the order as Rommel's personal combat unit to cross the Libyan border and attack Mersa Matruh," reflected Schneider.

"It was one of the greatest mistakes of Rommel, to push towards El Alamein. He should have gone back to the Egypt border once again."

A little under four months later, General Montgomery launched his offensive at El Alamein, the battle that would ultimately win the war in the desert for the Allies. "We knew that the British were preparing to attack El Alamein but we didn't know the power they had," said Schneider. "On 23 October, they started the attack. We were in the south of the Alamein line, only lightly defended because Rommel thought Montgomery would attack the north of the line. When the British attacked we fought them off, but then received orders to withdraw slowly through an anti-tank defensive position about 50 kilometres west of El Alamein... we didn't believe it when we were ordered to withdraw."

Kampfstaffel Kiehl fought with great gallantry in the initial assault on the Alamein Line, using the American Honey tanks they had captured at Gazala to push back the Free French. Further north, the fighting was just as ferocious but, gradually and inexorably, the Allies began to advance west.

Schneider and the rest of the Afrika Korps began a withdrawal that while disciplined and orderly, continued for the next six months as the Allies pushed across Libya and into Tunisia.

"My last fight with the British was at Sidi Ali el Hattab, just west of Tunis," said Schneider. "We captured six British soldiers and we wondered what to do with them. Our commanders told us it was forbidden to shoot them, so we shared our rations with them, but at this point we had hardly any left. Just stale black bread. No toilet paper or coffee, and we were making tea by boiling water and adding some leaves from trees. The British soldiers looked at us and said, 'you live like dogs'. They didn't understand, seeing the state we were in, why we continued to fight."

Schneider was eventually captured by American troops near to Kelibia in Tunisia on 16 May 1943, an event that caused a mix of emotions.

"On the one hand, I was happy to have survived when so many of my comrades had died," he reflected. "But we were prisoners and we all wondered what would now happen to us."



**Above:** An infantryman stands beside a knocked out M3 Lee in Tunisia, December 1942

Schneider was shipped to the USA where he spent the rest of the war. When he finally returned to what was, by then, East Germany, he learned that of the 389 soldiers in the Kampfstaffel, "...only 39 came back." He was one of the lucky ones, perhaps the luckiest of all, because waiting for him when he returned to Saxony was his girlfriend, Alfreda, whose photograph he had kept with him throughout seven years of separation. "I didn't talk to Rommel much, but one of [the] few times he spoke to me was to ask if I had a girlfriend," said Schneider. "I said 'I do, Herr General', and he replied 'I hope only one'."

**Below:** The Afrika Korps never raised a unit similar to that of the SAS, some of whom are seen here in Egypt in early 1942



Images: Alamy, Getty, Rex Features



**Panzer IIIs of the Afrika Korps charge through the desert of Libya**

Roger-Viollet/Rex/Shutterstock



# WARRIORS OF THE WEHRMACHT



The incredible deeds of these Axis soldiers changed the course of battles and struck terror into the hearts of their foes

WORDS MICHAEL E. HASKEW

**T**he German soldier in World War II is universally acknowledged as one of the finest in the history of warfare. Faced with the daunting tasks of close combat, the limits of his endurance tested repeatedly, the soldier of the Wehrmacht has become legendary. Early in World War II, he was the

face of aggression and conquest, but as the conflict dragged on he became the epitome of raw courage and dedication to duty. From the heat of the North African desert to the steppes of Russia, the frozen reaches of the Arctic and the hedgerows of France, the German soldier, or Landser, etched a story of unequalled combat prowess, and in defeat

he earned the grudging respect of the Allies who faced him day after day in gruelling circumstances. Both villainous Nazi fanatics and ordinary Germans defending their Fatherland fought and died from 1939–1945, and while the myth of a ‘clean’ Wehrmacht has been exposed, its devotion to duty and willingness to sacrifice is undeniable.

## MATTHÄUS HETZENAUER

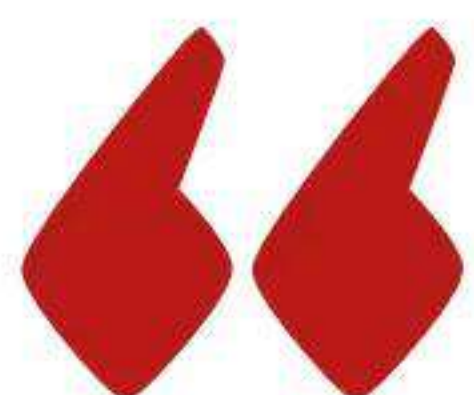
**Years of service:** 1943–1945

**Kills:** 345

**B**orn in a small village in the Austrian Alps, Hetzenauer learned his deadly trade from hunting deer in the hills. Officers rapidly identified Hetzenauer’s excellent marksmanship after he was drafted into the Wehrmacht at the age of 17, and he was quickly transferred to sniper school to hone his skills.

Hetzenauer was unleashed in the Carpathians in August 1944 with orders to protect mountain artillery units from the advancing Red Army. Almost every day the Germans came under attack from Soviet guns. Hetzenauer slipped away from the lines to find a nest from which he could take out any officers who were unfortunate enough to draw his attention. During one Soviet assault Hetzenauer was responsible for the death of eight different company commanders, throwing the attack into confusion.

Hetzenauer stayed in position throughout the daylight hours, looking to take particular advantage at dawn and dusk when enemy soldiers were more careless and exposed themselves to his telescopic sight. During ten months at the front, Hetzenauer made 345 confirmed kills – more than one a day. He was also on the receiving end, suffering a head wound during an artillery barrage. Only capture by the Red Army in May 1945 brought the most prolific Axis sniper’s reign of terror to an end.



**DURING ONE SOVIET ASSAULT  
HETZENAUER WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR  
THE DEATH OF EIGHT COMPANY COMMANDERS”**







## JOSEF ALLERBERGER

**Years of service:** 1942–1945

**Kills:** 257

**A** compatriot of Hetzenauer in the 3rd Mountain Division, Allerberger discovered he had a sniper's eye while experimenting with a captured Soviet rifle. His first kill came when he took out a Soviet sniper who was pinning down German troops. Allerberger patiently identified his position by showing a dummy target, then settled down to shoot from between two tree stumps. When German observers rushed out to confirm the kill they discovered that Allerberger had shot his opponent through his right eye.

The 19-year-old self-taught sniper made 23 confirmed kills before being sent for formal training. Upon his return to the Eastern Front, Allerberger proved himself on more than one occasion. In one encounter at Balakovo, Allerberger despatched 18 female snipers who were shooting at German positions from vantage points in trees. Allerberger identified their positions by spotting which tree branches shook and cleared them within an hour. He also stopped an attack headed by three T-34 tanks when the officer commanding the lead tank made the mistake of lifting his hatch a few inches and peeking out. Allerberger pulled the trigger and the officer slumped back amid a red spray. The tanks quickly turned and headed for home, carrying another victim of the Third Reich's second-deadliest sniper.



**OBSERVERS RUSHED OUT TO DISCOVER THAT ALLERBERGER HAD SHOT HIS OPPONENT THROUGH HIS RIGHT EYE"**

## GÜNTHER VIEZENZ

**Years of service:** 1939–1945

**Kills:** 21 Soviet tanks

**F**irst Lieutenant Günther Viezenz was 22 years old in the autumn of 1943 and leading the 10th Company and then a battalion of the 7th Grenadier Regiment, 252nd Infantry Division, against a determined attack by elements of the Soviet Red Army on the Eastern Front. During three days of heavy fighting the Soviets were thrown back with significant losses, and Viezenz was in the thick of it, destroying several enemy T-34 medium tanks on his own using explosive charges and continually exposing himself to small-arms fire. By the end of the engagement he had destroyed his seventh Red Army tank. On 27 January 1944, Viezenz was awarded the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross for his heroism during the three-day ordeal.

He is credited with destroying 21 Soviet tanks during the course of the war, and yet despite constantly being in the thick of the action he survived the conflict. Promoted to the rank of captain, he received four coveted Tank Destruction Badges in gold and one in silver. At the time of his decisive engagement, Viezenz was already a holder of the Iron Cross, 1st and 2nd Class. He went on to serve in the postwar West German Army and died in 1999 in the city of Cologne at age 78.





FRITZ CHRISTEN

Years of service: 1940-1945  
Kills: 13 Soviet tanks

**T**he situation was grim in the Demyansk Pocket when Fritz Christen and his Waffen SS comrades faced a Red Army onslaught intent on breaking through their lines. On the morning of 24 September 1941, Christen was in the midst of a fight for his life. Serving with an anti-tank battery of the 3rd SS Panzer Division Totenkopf, or Death’s Head, he was continually exposed to enemy small-arms fire, and all of his comrades lay sprawled dead or wounded around him. Christen continued to load and fire his 50mm anti-tank gun single-handedly and engaged in hand-to-hand combat when Soviet soldiers approached his position. During two days of constant fighting he accounted for the destruction of 13 Red Army tanks and killed or wounded at least 100 enemy soldiers. Hitler personally presented Christen with the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross on 20 October 1941, and his subsequent reunion with his parents was recorded on newsreel footage for use by Nazi propagandists as depicting the loyal and true SS soldier. Christen was taken prisoner by American troops and then handed over to the Soviets in May 1945. He was released after a decade and died in Bavaria in 1995 at the age of 74.



HEIN SEVERLOH

Years of service: 1941-1945  
Kills: Hundreds of Americans at Omaha Beach

**H**einrich “Hein” Severloh was just days away from his 21st birthday when American troops began pouring ashore at Omaha Beach in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944. Severloh, a corporal in the 352nd Infantry Division, manned an MG-42 machine gun in a heavily fortified defensive position designated WN-62. Throughout the morning, he fired steadily at the Americans as they emerged from landing craft and sought what shelter they could as German fire swept the beach. His relentless stream of bullets shot down an estimated 1,000 or more American soldiers as they struggled through the surf. Severloh earned the nickname “Beast of Omaha Beach”, and he claimed to have held his position until at least 3:30 p.m., firing around 13,500 machine-gun rounds and 400 shots from two Karabiner 98k rifles. Compelled to abandon his position as the Americans gained a toehold on Omaha Beach, Severloh retreated to a nearby village, where he was captured the following day. During a 2004 interview, he commented, “I do not know how many men I shot. It was awful. Thinking about it makes me want to throw up.” Severloh wrote a postwar memoir of his experiences and died in Lachendorf, Germany, in 2006 at the age of 82.

“HE FIRED STEADILY AT THE AMERICANS AS THEY EMERGED FROM LANDING CRAFT AND SOUGHT WHAT SHELTER THEY COULD AS GERMAN FIRE SWEEPED THE BEACH”



Creative Commons bonsoir pascal/ via Wikipedia



## KURT KNISPEL

**Years of service:** 1940–1945

**Kills:** 168 Confirmed

**T**he Soviet T-34, arguably the best all-round tank of WWII, lumbered into view, but it was distant – a range of 3,000 metres made it a long shot. No matter. Feldwebel Kurt Knispel patiently assessed the situation and ordered his gunner to fire. Seconds later the target erupted in flames. Knispel was already a legend in his own brief time, the ace of aces in the Wehrmacht's panzerwaffe. Knispel volunteered for the army at the age of 19. He rose to command both Tiger I and Tiger II tanks, mounting lethal 88mm guns. He displayed tremendous aptitude in killing Red Army tanks, running up an impressive score of 168, while dozens of others, perhaps more than 100, remain unconfirmed. Knispel was also known to readily defer to another tank commander when questions regarding credit arose. He received the Iron Cross 1st Class, the Tank Assault Badge in gold, and the German Cross in gold. However, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross eluded him – probably due to his lack of concern with military protocol, a penchant for facial hair, and a willingness to speak his mind. He served famously with the 503rd Heavy Panzer Battalion, 12th Panzer Division, and was killed in action at age 23 on 28 April 1945, just ten days before the war ended.

**“HE DISPLAYED TREMENDOUS APTITUDE IN KILLING RED ARMY TANKS, RUNNING UP AN IMPRESSIVE SCORE OF 168”**



Wikipedia

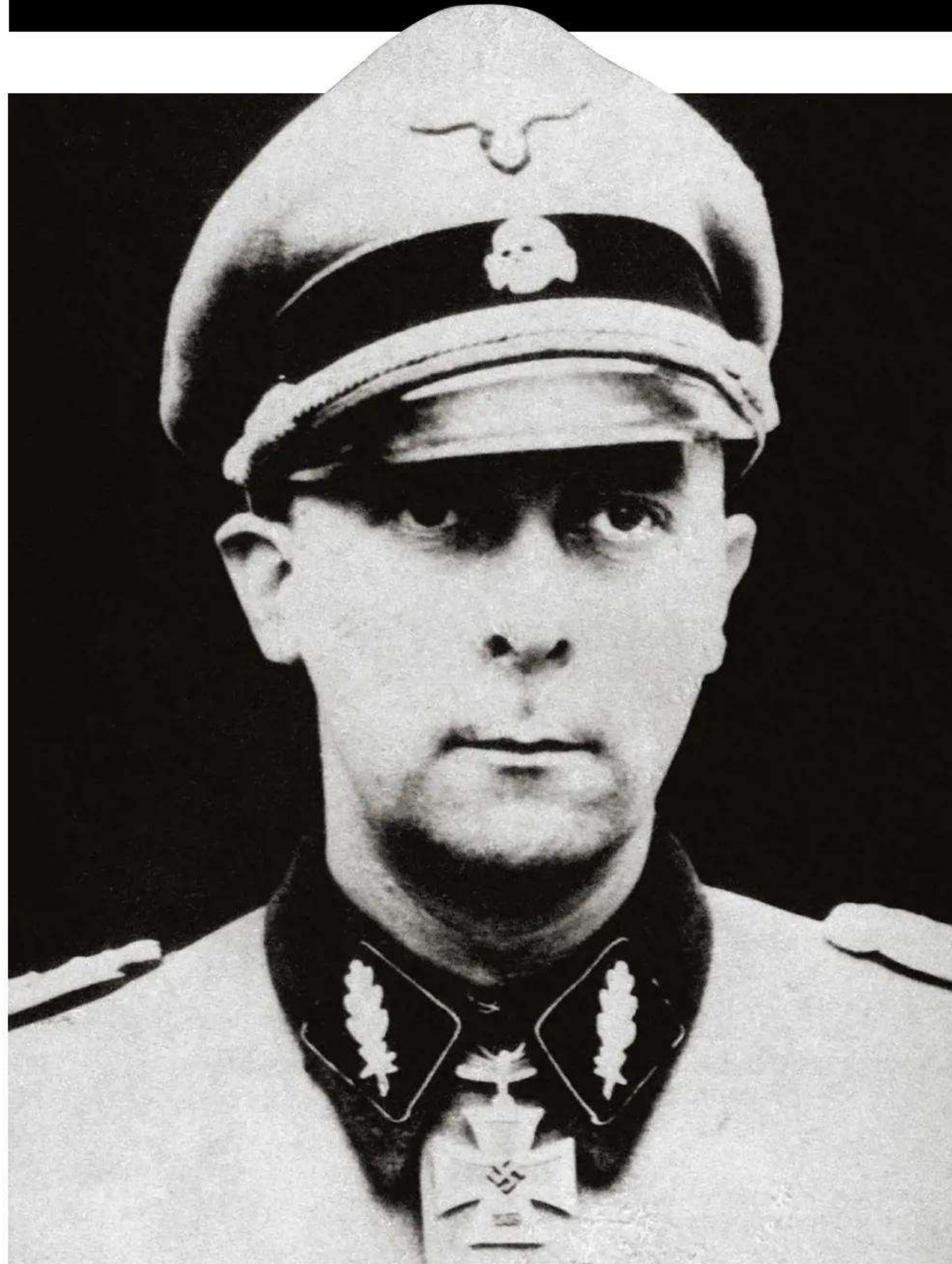


Image: Alamy

## WILHELM MOHNKE

**Years of service:** 1931–1945

**Kills:** N/A

**S**S Brigadeführer Wilhelm Mohnke led the defence of the administrative sector of Berlin during the fight for the German capital in the spring of 1945. After the city fell to the Red Army, he spent a decade in Soviet prisons. Prior to that ignominious end, however, Mohnke had proven to be a soldier of extraordinary courage.

Quite willing to stand in harm's way, he was wounded several times. He commanded troops on both the Eastern and Western fronts and suffered a serious wound during the conquest of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1941, leaving him with a permanent limp. On 11 July 1944, Mohnke was presented the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for action in Normandy during the harrowing weeks that followed the Allied D-Day landings. He commanded the 26th Panzergrenadier Regiment, 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth), holding the vital crossings of the River Seine during the withdrawal from the Falaise Pocket.

Mohnke was also a holder of the Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class, the Wound Badge in gold, the War Merit Cross, the German Cross in gold, and the Infantry Assault Badge. He was implicated after troops under his command were responsible for the murders of Canadian prisoners in Normandy, but no formal charges were ever filed. He died in 2001 in Barsbüttel, Germany, aged 90.

**“HE COMMANDED ON BOTH THE EASTERN AND WESTERN FRONT AND SUFFERED A SERIOUS WOUND DURING THE CONQUEST OF YUGOSLAVIA”**



# JAGDPANZER



Over 2,800 ‘Hetzers’ were produced between March 1944 and May 1945, and they became among the most successful tank hunters of the war

WORDS CRAIG MOORE

## FALSE VISION PORTS

Black rectangular false vision port stripes were painted on the glacis plate to try and draw the enemy's fire away from the driver's periscopes. This was a successful ploy first used on British WWI tanks.

## PAINT JOB

Jagdpanzer 38 tank hunters left the factory painted dark sandy yellow (Dunkelgelb RAL 7028). Camouflage patterns were painted onto the vehicles when they arrived at the unit they were assigned to.

## ARMOUR PROTECTION

To keep the weight down, the side armour was only 20mm thick. The front glacis plate armour was 60mm thick, angled at 30°. This gave an effective thickness of 120mm against a shell fired straight at the front armour.



**T**he Jagdpanzer 38 ‘Hetzer’ tank hunter is a very misunderstood self-propelled anti-tank gun. For a start, it was not officially called the Hetzer during World War II. Deriving from the German hunting term ‘hetzen’, meaning to hunt your prey at high speed until it collapses or is caught, only a handful of official wartime documents used the nickname Hetzer.

At a January 1944 meeting between German army ordnance officers and the Czech BMM factory, the internal project name Hetzer was wrongly assigned to the Jagdpanzer 38 due to a misunderstanding.

In reality, the Jagdpanzer 38 was a slow vehicle and could not chase enemy tanks. Instead, it was a long-range ambush weapon designed to be used in defence or to protect

the flanks of an attack from an enemy counterattack. It was not designed to be used at the front of an attack. In addition, Jagdpanzer 38s ordinarily hunted in packs rather than fighting as solitary killers. Although the main gun had a limited traverse left and right, four to six vehicles hidden in the edge of a wood or hedgerow could cover a large area.



# ZER 38



## JAGDPANZER 38

COMMISSIONED:	1944
ORIGIN:	GERMANY, BUT BUILT IN THE PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA (CZECH REPUBLIC)
LENGTH:	6.27M (20FT 6.8IN)
RANGE:	180KM (111 MILES)
ENGINE:	PRAGA EPA AC 2800 6-CYLINDER 158 HP PETROL ENGINE
CREW:	4
ARMOUR:	8MM TO 60MM
PRIMARY WEAPON:	7.5CM PAK 39 L/4
SECONDARY WEAPON:	7.92MM M.G.34 MACHINE GUN

Illustration: Battlefield Design



**FACTORY CAMOUFLAGE**  
From October 1944, Jagdpanzer 38s were painted in a camouflage pattern before they left the BMM factory. It had a base colour of Dunkelgelb with stripes and patches of dark red-brown (Rotbraun RAL8017) and dark olive green (Olivgrün RAL6003).

“IT WAS A LONG-RANGE AMBUSH WEAPON DESIGNED TO BE USED IN DEFENCE OR TO PROTECT THE FLANKS OF AN ATTACK FROM AN ENEMY COUNTERATTACK”



# Armament

The Jagdpanzer 38 was equipped with the 7.5cm Panzerjägerkanone 39 L/48 (7.5cm Pak 39 L/48) anti-tank gun. The German word 'Panzerjägerkanone' translates as 'tank hunter gun' (anti-tank gun). It was an electrically fired weapon fitted with a semi-automatic breech mechanism and a 48 calibre long barrel. It could penetrate the armour of most common Allied tanks at ranges up to 1km. The tank's loader also had the job of rearming and firing the remote-controlled roof-mounted 360° swivelling 7.92mm M.G.34 machinegun.



The tank's loader fired the roof-mounted machine gun by using the two handles to aim it at the target



This is the 75mm Pak 39 L/48 anti-tank gun breech of the Jagdpanzer 38 at the Arsenalen Swedish Tank Museum

The front armour was interlocked for added strength. You can see the welds on this Jagdpanzer 38 at the Swiss Panzermuseum



This Jagdpanzer 38 is one of only 13 wartime survivors. It is on display at the Arsenalen Swedish Tank Museum

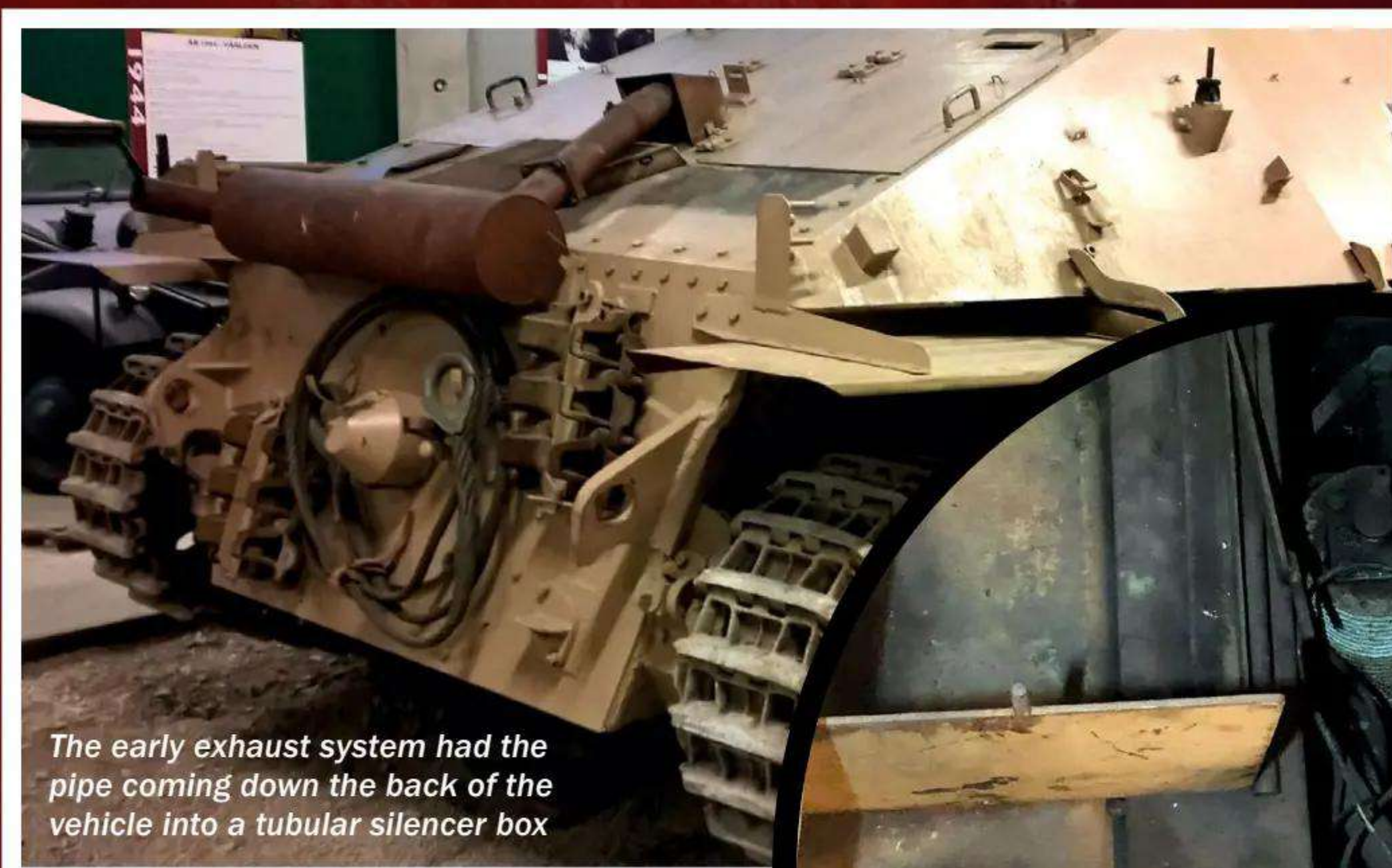


## Design

Allied bombing affected the production of the Sturmgeschütz III assault gun. There was spare capacity at the BMM/CKD and Škoda factories near Prague, but their factory cranes could not lift the weight of a completed Sturmgeschütz III. The factories had produced the Panzer 38(t) tank. A light tank hunter design, armed with a 75cm Pak 39 gun using an extended Panzer 38(t) hull, its tried and tested suspension and reliable mechanical parts was accepted and production started in March 1944.

## Engine

The Jagdpanzer 38 was powered by a Praga EPA AC 2800 6-cylinder 158hp petrol engine. It was very similar to the one used in the Panzer 38(t) tank but had been uprated. Instead of producing 129hp, it now produced 158hp. The engine was connected to a five-speed Praga-Wilson transmission, which was in turn connected to a planetary steering system. Its top road speed was 40km/h (24.9mph). The production vehicle weighed 16 tonnes rather than the proposed 13 tonnes, which affected the vehicle's speed.



The early exhaust system had the pipe coming down the back of the vehicle into a tubular silencer box

Right: This is the Praga EPA AC 2800 6-cylinder 158hp petrol engine fitted in the Jagdpanzer at the Arsenalen Swedish Tank Museum

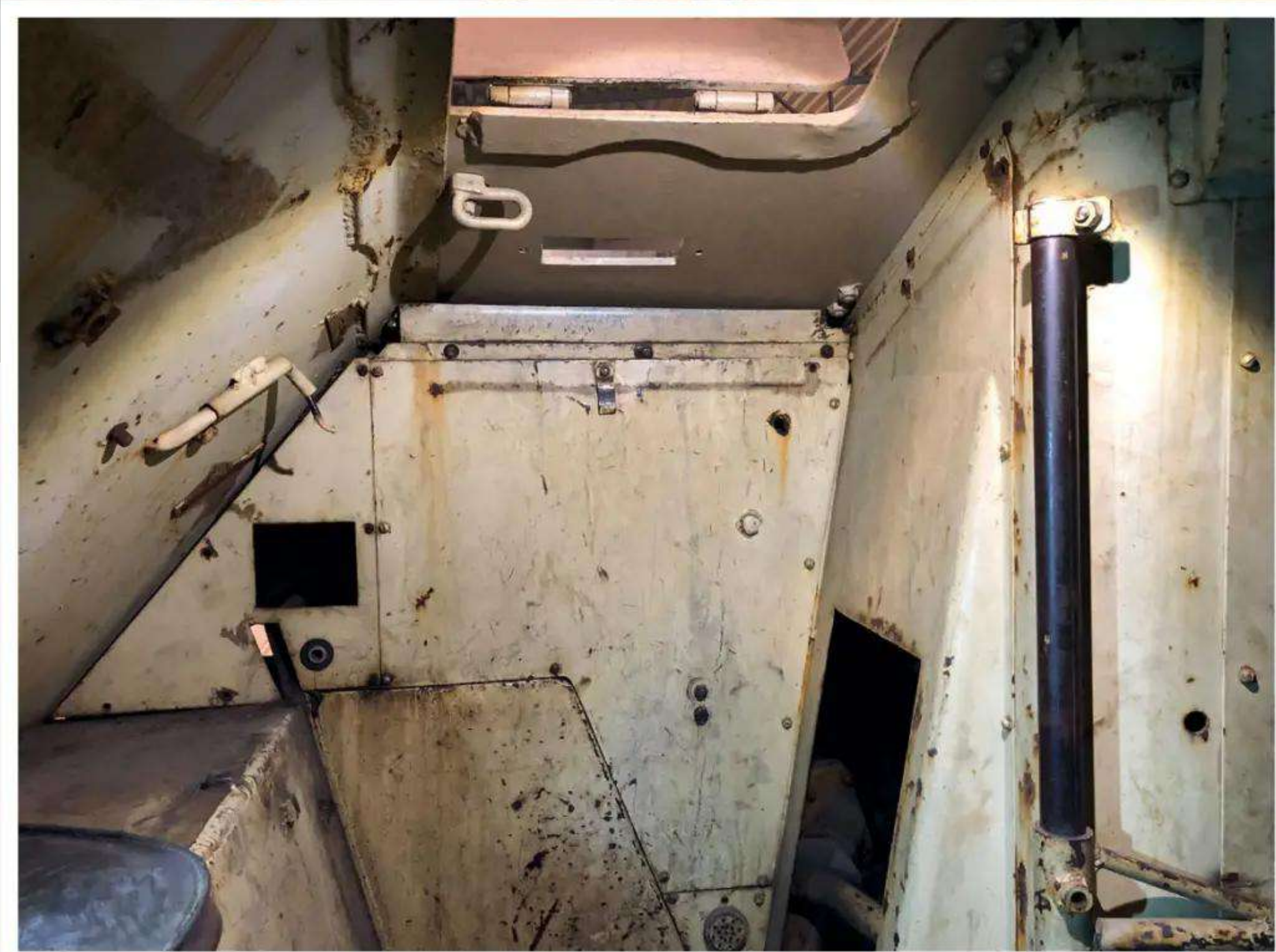




All images © Arsenalen Tank Museum unless otherwise stated

Crew compartment

The Jagdpanzer 38 gun mount was fixed to the glacis plate. The gun was installed off-centre, to the right of the vehicle. This enabled the driver, gunner and loader's positions to be on the left side of the vehicle, in line, one behind the other. The commander sat on the right side of the vehicle, at the rear of the fighting compartment, directly behind the gun, with his hatch above him. He did not have access to an armoured cupola.



Above: The Jagdpanzer 38 driver's position was on the left-side of the gun. The gunner and loader sat immediately behind him

Left: The commander sat at the rear-right and poked scissor periscopes out of his hatch during combat. He had a rear-facing periscope



## Service history

From 20 June 1944, the German tank hunting training schools started to receive Jagdpanzer 38s. Crews were taught to find preselected firing positions, preferably behind an earth wall in cover, such as at the edge of a wood. Once targets had been engaged and there were no more targets available, the commander was instructed to direct the driver to change to a different location by reversing out of their current position to avoid being hit by enemy artillery. Jagdpanzer 38s were issued to combat units from early July 1944 onwards.

The majority of the Jagdpanzer 38s saw service on the eastern front with the Heeres Panzerjäger Abteilungen (Army Tank Hunter Battalions) 561, 731, 741, 743 and 744, but some companies were diverted to the Arnhem sector in Holland to help stop the Allied Operation Market Garden in September 1944. In December 1944 and January 1945, 295 Jagdpanzer 38s were deployed in the winter Ardennes offensive, the Battle of the Bulge.



*An American infantryman of the 29th Infantry Division, carrying a bazooka anti-tank rocket launcher, runs past a knocked out burning Jagdpanzer 38 during the Siegfried Line Campaign on 4 December 1944 at Aldenhoven in the North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany*

*Above: German infantry advances in a Silesian village supported by a Jagdpanzer 38. The soldier pictured right is the 2nd gunner of a machine-gun team, who carries on his back ammunition and additional barrels for the gun*



**SOME COMPANIES WERE DIVERTED TO THE ARNHEM SECTOR IN HOLLAND TO HELP STOP THE ALLIED OPERATION MARKET GARDEN IN SEPTEMBER 1944"**





# ERICH VON MANSTEIN

## THE FÜHRER'S FINEST



A brilliant battlefield strategist, Manstein's clashes with Hitler finally led to his dismissal before the end of WWII

WORDS STEVEN JENKINS





*Top: Field Marshal Erich von Manstein with Turkish officers during the Battle of Kursk*  
*Inset: Manstein (far right) is seen here sitting in the dock at the start of his trial before a British military court in Hamburg, 23 August 1949*

**C**onsidered one of the greatest German generals of his generation, Erich von Manstein was born Fritz Erich Georg Eduard von Lewinski on 24 November 1887 in Berlin.

He was the tenth son of Prussian aristocrat and artillery general Eduard von Lewinski and Helene von Sperling.

After being adopted by Helene's younger sister, Hedwig von Sperling, who was married to Lieutenant General Georg von Manstein, the boy became Erich von Manstein.

His family were steeped in military history with his paternal grandfather, Albrecht Gustav von Manstein, having fought in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, and his maternal grandfather, Oskar von Sperling, being the Chief of Staff of First Army. All in all 16 of his relatives from both sides of the family rose to the rank of general, with his uncle Paul von Hindenburg going on to be the future Generalfeldmarschall and President of Germany.

With Manstein's military destiny seemingly already mapped out, he joined the cadet corps in 1900. After six years in the corps he joined the Third Foot Guards Regiment as an ensign before beginning a three-year officer training programme at the Prussian War Academy in October 1913.

The outbreak of WWI put paid to his training, which he was never to complete. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant at the beginning of the war and served on both the Western and Eastern fronts.

Marrying Jutta Sibylle von Loesch in 1920, Manstein continued to rise through the ranks of the German Army. The Nazi Party seized power in 1933, and he moved to Berlin in February in 1934 as a full colonel. He continued to enhance his military skills, taking roles such as Head of the Operations Branch of the Army General Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff before becoming a lieutenant general in the 18th Infantry Division in Silesia on the Polish border in February 1938.

## The invasion of Poland

Just before the outbreak of WWII Manstein was appointed Chief of Staff to Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South in preparation for Fall Weiss (Case White) – the codename for the invasion of Poland. He worked alongside Rundstedt's Chief of Operations, Colonel Günther Blumentritt, who approved Manstein's plan to concentrate the majority of the army group's armoured units into the 10th Army. The objective was to provide a decisive breakthrough that would lead to the encirclement of Polish forces.

Ten days before the invasion Manstein attended a meeting at which Hitler underlined the need for the destruction of Poland as a nation. Manstein later stated in his memoirs that he did not recognise at the time of this meeting that Hitler was going to pursue a policy of extermination, but after the war he would face charges of war crimes relating to civilian deaths in the sectors under his control.



Privately Manstein wasn't keen on the invasion, but his plan was a success, with the conquest of Poland taking just five weeks. The last Polish military units surrendered on 6 October 1939. His success in the Polish campaign saw him promoted to Chief of Staff Army Group A under the watchful eye of Rundstedt.

## The battle for France

With Poland under German control Manstein's attention switched to the capture of France. The initial plan for the invasion – codenamed Fall Gelb (Case Yellow) – developed by Commander-in-Chief of the Army Colonel General Walther von Brauchitsch, General Halder and members of the OKH (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – Armed Forces High Command) wasn't well received by Hitler.

It was then that Manstein stepped in and made his thoughts known. He felt that the plan of attack lacked the element of surprise and would expose the German forces to counter attacks from the south. He believed that the operation would only lead to partial success.

To counteract the original plan he developed the outline of a new strategy. The Manstein Plan, also known as Operation Sichelschnitt ('sickle cut') would see Panzer divisions attack through the wooded hills of the Ardennes where the enemy would least expect a German thrust, giving them the element of surprise. Then they were to establish bridgeheads on the Meuse River before rapidly driving forward to the English Channel.

The plan was an outstanding military success, with the Allied armies being cut in two, leading to the surrender of the Belgian Army and Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of the BEF and French forces from Dunkirk. More success for Manstein saw him promoted to a full general and awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, one of the highest awards in the German military.

With France conquered, the next step in Hitler's great war plan was to crush the Soviet Union. In March 1941 Manstein was appointed commander of the 56th Panzer Corps of Panzer

Group 4 of Army Group North, which was slated to participate in Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR. Manstein's corps were so successful in the initial phases of the invasion that they reached the Dvina River – nearly 200 miles from their starting point – in just four days. This left them without any support and cut off, but they were able to fight their way out before finally being stopped by the Soviets at Luga.

Manstein's involvement in the operation was curtailed in September 1941 when he took over the 11th Army of Army Group South in Ukraine thanks to the unfortunate demise of its Colonel general Eugen Ritter von Schober, who was killed when his plane landed in a Soviet minefield.

The 11th Army, consisting mainly of infantry, was tasked with invading the Crimean Peninsula. The purpose of the operation was to prevent the Red Army from using airbases in the Crimea and to cut off the Soviet supply of oil from the Caucasus. By 16 November 1941 Manstein and his troops had captured all of the Crimean Peninsula except for Sevastopol. The first and second attacks on the city and its heavily fortified naval base failed. On 26 December Soviet troops landed on the Kerch Straits to retake Kerch and its peninsula. Manstein had to wait until 8 May 1942 before commencing the Battle of the Kerch Peninsula. Thanks to some smart tactics from Manstein, Kerch was captured on 16 May. Approximately 170,000 prisoners were captured with the loss of only 8,000 Axis troops. A surprise attack on Sevastopol on 29 June saw the city fall into German hands by 4 July.

It was during the Crimean campaign that Manstein was indirectly involved in a number of atrocities, including the massacre of a group of Jewish women and children that he would later be charged for.

Manstein's success at Sevastopol convinced Hitler that he was the right man to take command in Leningrad, which had been under siege since September 1941. Arriving on 27 August 1942, Manstein again lacked the troops he needed to launch an assault, so he devised a daring plan to cut off Leningrad's supply line at Lake Ladoga. This worked to a certain degree but an ensuing stalemate forced a fresh assault to be put on hold.

Hitler's attention turned to Stalingrad as the German advance continued, and Manstein was appointed commander of the newly created Army Group Don. Its main job was to break the Soviet encirclement of the stricken German 6th Army, which had been trapped inside Stalingrad by a Soviet pincer movement. This relief operation was codenamed Winter Storm, but despite its formidable title it failed to blow the Soviets away; Manstein's three Panzer divisions advanced to within 30 miles of Stalingrad and no further.

On 24 January, Manstein urged Hitler to allow Paulus, commander of the 6th Army, to surrender, but the Führer refused, insisting Paulus fought on. In reality this was impossible, and on 31 January 1943 a dejected Paulus surrendered. Manstein believed he had done his best, but Winrich Behr, an encircled officer, disagreed, saying, "His weakness was that he didn't take a stronger stance against Hitler."

The Soviet success in holding Stalingrad while husbanding an enormous reserve force behind the lines enabled them to unleash a series of

devastating counteroffensives in January and February 1943 aimed at driving the Germans back. By 9 February Kursk was back under Soviet control.

Manstein's troops were reorganised and reinforcements were called in as he planned a counteroffensive that would prove to be one of his greatest triumphs. The Third Battle of Kharkov loomed.

In the first phases of the fighting Manstein's army flanked, encircled and defeated the Red Army's armoured spearheads south of Kharkov. This enabled Manstein to renew his offensive to take back Kharkov. On 7 March his troops lunged towards the west – instead of the east, as expected – of Kharkov and encircled the Soviets. To reinforce the importance of the mission Hitler travelled to the front line to meet Manstein to review the situation on 10 March 1943.

“BY 16 NOVEMBER  
1941 MANSTEIN AND  
HIS TROOPS HAD CAPTURED ALL  
OF THE CRIMEAN PENINSULA  
EXCEPT FOR SEVASTOPOL”



Above: Portrait of Erich von Manstein in full military uniform





German SS grenadiers run across a street on the outskirts of Kharkov



Ruined Soviet tanks and dead Red Army troops litter the gates of Kharkov



Erich von Manstein (standing on a car) with German and Romanian units at the front near Kerch, Ukraine





Wearing a thick winter hat, Manstein meets German troops stationed in Czerkasy, Ukraine

On 11 March the final phase of the attack on the city of Kharkov began. By the 12th progress into the city centre had been made. After fierce house-to-house fighting the entire city was back in German hands by the 15th. Manstein's counteroffensive had regained substantial territory and resulted in the destruction of three Soviet armies and the retreat of three more. He received the Oak Leaves for the Knight's Cross for the operation.

After the battle at Kharkov Manstein favoured an immediate pincer attack on the Kursk salient, but Hitler rebutted the suggestion. The Soviets capitalised on this unexpected reprieve to reinforce, and by the time Operation Citadel (the last German strategic offensive on the Eastern Front) and one of the largest battles in history, involving more than 4 million men) began on 5 July 1943, the German Army was

outnumbered nearly three to one. On 13 July Hitler called off the failed Kursk offensive. The Germans retreated to the Mius River and the lower Dnieper as the Soviets prepared to launch an offensive on 3 August. The army couldn't hold back the red tide and Hitler finally allowed Manstein to withdraw back across the Dnieper on 15 September. It was at his point that he ordered a scorched-earth policy that was later brought up in his trial.

Nearly four months later, on 4 January 1944, Manstein met with Hitler to tell him that they needed to retreat to save the army from further losses. Manstein clashed with Hitler when he refused to allow the retreat, requesting changes in military leadership at the highest level.

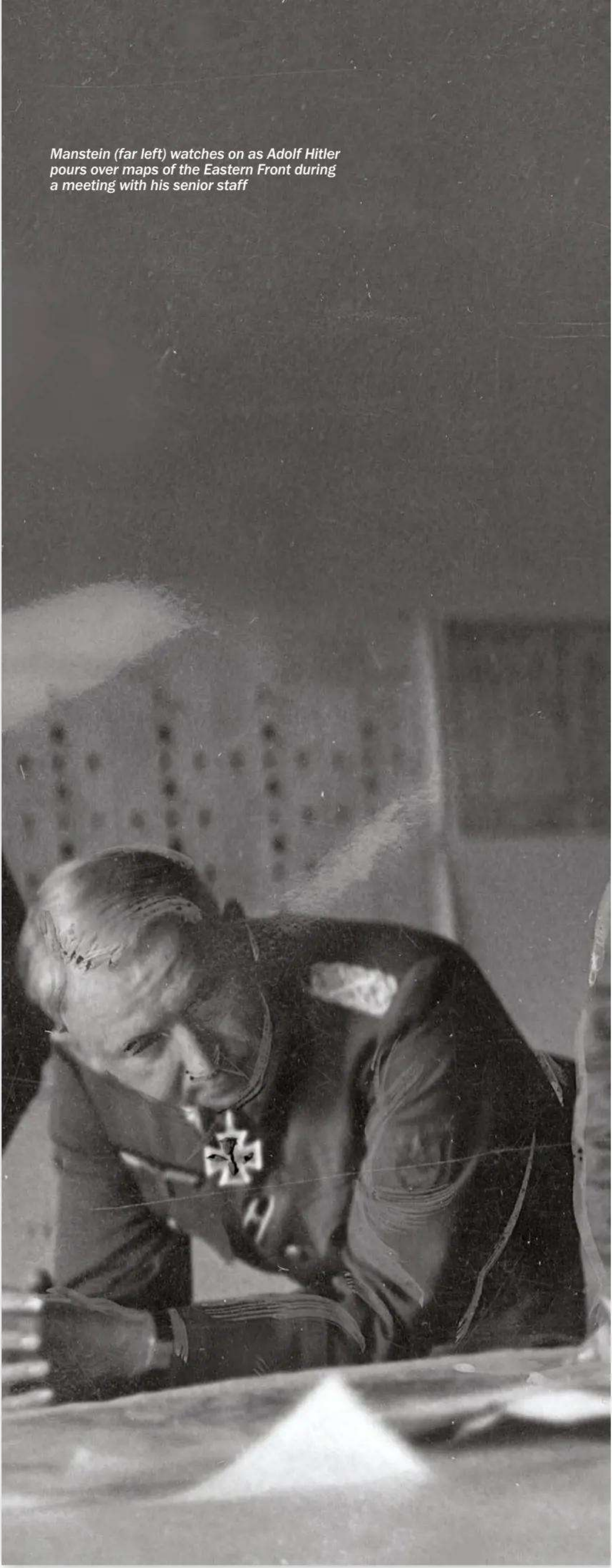
During the night of 16–17 February and without Hitler's permission, Manstein ordered his troops to try and break out of the Korsun Pocket. By the beginning of March the Red Army was firmly in the ascendance and Manstein's troops were surrounded. He rowed with Hitler again, once more asking for permission to break out. When it didn't arrive he flew to Hitler's HQ to try to convince him to change his mind. Hitler finally relented, but the end was in sight for Manstein, and he was relieved of his duties on 30 March 1944.

### War criminal

Manstein spent the rest of the war on his estate until August 1945, when he was arrested by the British. He was initially held in a prisoner of war camp in Lüneburg in northern Germany. After spending a few months in the camp he was transferred to Nuremberg in October 1945, where he was to give evidence for the defence for the German General Staff and the Wehrmacht supreme command (the OKW), who were on trial in Nuremberg. In the end it wasn't until August 1946 that Manstein finally got the chance to give his testimony. The following month the court declared that the General Staff and the OKW were not criminal organisations, in part thanks to Manstein's evidence.



From 1955 Manstein acted as a senior advisor for the West German Government to help build a new German army



Manstein (far left) watches on as Adolf Hitler pours over maps of the Eastern Front during a meeting with his senior staff

After his testimony he was transferred to the Island Farm prisoner-of-war camp (a.k.a. Special Camp 11) in Bridgend, Wales, while the British decided if he would personally face a war crimes trial. In March 1948 – over a year and a half after moving to Island Farm – the Soviet Union requested that Manstein be turned over to them to be tried on their soil, but the British denied the request. However, the Soviets' demand helped to speed up the decision-making process, with the British determining that Manstein should be tried in his homeland. In July 1948 he was transported to northern Germany to await trial. Manstein finally sat in the dock in August 1949 in Hamburg, where he faced 17 charges; three relating to events in Poland and 14





linked to crimes committed in the Soviet Union, including authorising or permitting the killing, deportation and maltreatment of Jews, Polish civilians and prisoners of war.

After an adjournment of three weeks, the Judge Advocate Charles Arthur Collingwood presented his summation from 12–16 December. He said that perpetrators of war crimes could not be absolved of guilt by claiming that they were only following orders.

Manstein was found guilty on nine charges and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Manstein's supporters in Britain and Germany were not happy, claiming it was a political decision, and his sentence was reduced to 12 years in February 1950. But the Manstein circus was not finished yet.

Pressure from a number of well-known supporters such as Winston Churchill and German statesman Konrad Adenauer, along

with recurring eye problems, saw his early release on 7 May 1953.

In 1955, the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer asked Manstein to act as a senior advisor to help build a new German army to facilitate Germany's entry into NATO. It was at the same time that Manstein released his revered memoir, *Verlorene Siege* ('Lost Victories'). In the book Manstein took the credit for German victories and blamed Hitler and his fellow generals for every defeat.

Manstein died of a stroke in June 1973 at the age of 85. He was buried with full military honours and resides in the Friedhof Dorfmark cemetery in the town of Bad Fallingb. To this day his methods are taught in military academies around the world.

**“MANSTEIN FINALLY SAT IN THE DOCK IN AUGUST 1949 IN HAMBURG, WHERE HE FACED 17 CHARGES, INCLUDING PERMITTING THE KILLING OF JEWS, POLISH CIVILIANS AND PRISONERS”**





# HITLER'S FOREIGN LEGIONS



In its final desperate hour, the Third Reich was defended by die-hard volunteers, recruited into the Waffen-SS from the nations of Nazi conquest. But who were these men, and how did they find themselves on the Führer's frontline?

WORDS JON TRIGG

**B**erlin is burning. After more than five years of war, the Nazis' much-vaunted 'thousand-year Reich' is finally coming to an end. But the agony isn't over quite yet. As the Soviet Red Army inexorably advances into the heart of the city, a few thousand surviving defenders desperately fight on.

One of them – an officer – tries to get a better view of what is happening by climbing up a telegraph pole. Precariously hanging on with one hand while holding his binoculars with the other, he doesn't see the Soviet marksman who shoots him. His men rush to his aid, but he's already dead.

As a sign of respect, and despite the chaos around them, they bury him in Plötsensee Cemetery, in a makeshift coffin made from old ammunition crates. The name on the grave marker reads "Per Sørensen" – the dead officer wasn't German, but hailed from the small parish of Essenbæk in Denmark.

A few days later, it's all over. Hitler is dead, the guns are finally silent. Among a column of dejected prisoners of war, a drunken Soviet



A camouflaged 75mm anti-tank gun is manned by 5. Wiking Division in 1944



soldier grabs a man out of the line, screaming into his face, "SS!, SS!". The guards pull him away, only for him to turn back and shoot the prisoner in the head. The column marches on, leaving the corpse where it fell.

This man wasn't German either; he was French, and his name was Roger Albert-Brunet, a native of Dauphine and a recipient of the Iron Cross First Class.

What were a Dane and a Frenchmen doing defending Berlin at the war's end? The truth is one of the most fascinating stories of World War II, and one of the least known.

### Genesis of the foreign SS legions

When Hitler sent the Wehrmacht to invade and occupy Scandinavia and western Europe in 1940, a new force went with the army, small in number but huge in symbolism: the Waffen, or 'Armed' SS. These men weren't regular soldiers exactly, but were part of something quite different, a military wing of the Nazi Party itself.

Established at first to protect Hitler and other senior Nazis from physical attack during the often-violent street politics of the 1920s and 1930s, they had evolved under the leadership of their head (and arch-intriguer) Heinrich Himmler into 'Special Purpose troops', answerable only to the party and Hitler himself. They had proven their loyalty during the 'Night of the Long Knives' when they brutally destroyed their rivals in the SA

**“AS FOR THE FRENCH, BELGIAN WALLOONS AND SPANISH, THEY WERE ALLOWED TO JOIN THE GERMAN ARMY BUT NOT THE WAFFEN-SS – THEY WEREN'T 'ARYAN' ENOUGH”**

brownshirts on their Führer's orders. They were 'rewarded' by being allowed to join the army in the Nazis' war of aggression.

At that time, they numbered a mere two divisions, a brigade and a handful of independent regiments, among a German force of well over 100 divisions, but Himmler and his sidekick Gottlob Berger – a former gym instructor – had big plans for their expansion. The stumbling block for the future growth of the Waffen-SS was the army, which had no wish to see anyone but itself bear arms for the nation, or cream off valuable manpower.

Berger's solution was to look outside Germany's borders, both for ethnic Germans – the so-called *volksdeutsche* – and those populations that were considered 'racially acceptable', which included the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Flemish Belgium

(the French-speaking Walloon half of the country was deemed 'beyond the Pale' at first). Interestingly, the English were also seen as acceptable, but the Celtic Scots, Irish and Welsh were not.

Several thousand volunteers came forward, many – but by no means all – supporters of far-right parties within their own countries, such as Anton Mussert's Dutch NSB and Vidkun Quisling's Norwegian Nasjonal Samling. In Belgian Flanders, the majority of recruits were nationalists who thought the Nazis would grant them a country of their own if they fought alongside them, or so young men like Oswald van Ooteghem believed: "We didn't join up for the pay, that's for sure!... I was then, and still am today, a Flemish nationalist, and that's why I joined." As for the French, Belgian Walloons and Spanish, they were allowed to join the German Army but not the Waffen-SS – they weren't 'Aryan' enough.

### The 'crusade against Bolshevism'

The invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 stimulated a surge in recruitment, as anti-communists eagerly enlisted from across the occupied countries, and new units were established to accommodate them. Volunteers tended to be concentrated in their national legions, or designated formations such as the SS-Wiking Division.



## HITLER'S ELITE

*Belgian Flemish SS-Legion Flandern volunteers train with an MG 34, in spring 1941, before heading to the siege lines around Leningrad*



Danish volunteer Ivar Corneliusen was in the Wiking's Westland Regiment as it advanced into Ukraine across the steppe: "I saw a Cossack attack with my own eyes, all of them on horseback and waving their sabres. They charged towards us, it was madness, I couldn't believe what I was seeing... we mowed them down, dozens and dozens of them... it was just slaughter, the machine-guns shredded them. We had a Dutch commander at the time and he loved horses, so when it was all over, he sent us out onto the steppe to shoot them and put them out of their misery."

Many other recruits found themselves in a variety of units either by choice or through the machinations of bureaucracy. For the former, several hundred Norwegians volunteered for specialist ski companies in the far north, fighting alongside the Finns. One of them was Asbjørn Narmo: "I joined the Waffen-SS to help the Finns. I wanted to go earlier to help them fight the Russians, but they wouldn't let me. So, when the Germans said they'd send volunteers there, that was it, I enlisted."

Several hundred other recruits ended up in several different units, like the Dane Andreas Fleischer: "I wanted to join the best, the Waffen-SS, and they sent me to the Totenkopf Division, I didn't have any choice about it." Serving pretty much exclusively on the Eastern Front, casualties were heavy, with the volunteers taking part in some of the bitterest battles of the campaign.

As the Soviets fought to lift the siege of Leningrad, their attacks were met by Flemings and Spaniards. One such man reported, "We reached Krasny Bor in February 1943... the road from Leningrad to Moscow became a road of death at Krasny Bor... you looked left and saw our soldiers piling up the dead

**I WANTED TO GO EARLIER TO HELP THEM FIGHT THE RUSSIANS, BUT THEY WOULDN'T LET ME. SO, WHEN THE GERMANS SAID THEY'D SEND VOLUNTEERS THERE, THAT WAS IT, I ENLISTED"**

and wounded. The scenes were horrific... unfortunately at some point a tank shell exploded near to both Harry and I (author; Harry de Booy was Oswald van Ooteghem's best friend) and we were both hit by shrapnel. I wasn't wounded all that badly, but Harry had been hit in the chest, near his heart... He died in my arms, calling my name."

### 1943: a bigger net

The Wehrmacht was suffering a manpower shortage by the spring of 1942, with casualties in Russia exceeding the 1 million mark. The surrender of the remnants of Sixth Army at Stalingrad the following year turned the shortage into a full-blown crisis. This was bad news for Himmler and Berger. Neither was content just filling the gaps torn in the ranks from the fighting, while the former in particular was determined to grow his own personal power through an expansion of the Waffen-SS.

As the army sought to solve its numbers problem with comb-outs of support services, transfers from the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine and additional categories of civilian workers reclassified for military service, the SS took a radically different approach. Having started

down the road of using non-Germans to fill the ranks as far back as 1940, the SS was well-positioned to grow on the backs of foreign recruits – and so it did. The original physical standards on selection, which had at first even barred volunteers who had a dental filling, were ignored. Also cast aside were the racial requirements that had been sacrosanct. A flurry of new divisions were established, such as the ethnic German 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division 'Prinz Eugen' and 8. Kavallerie-Division 'Florian Geyer' – both created to fight partisans behind the lines, the former in Yugoslavia, the latter in Russia.

They were soon joined by the 13. Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS 'Handschar', whose members were recruited from among the Muslim communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina; the division had its own imams and standard-issue fezes. Even the much-cherished anti-Slav bigotry was ditched, as divisions were raised among Latvians, Estonians and Ukrainians. The overall result was a doubling in size of the Waffen-SS by the end of 1943, and that number would continue to increase well into 1944.

### The western European assault brigades

As far as the SS authorities were concerned, the western Europeans had proven themselves in the fighting in Russia and were ready to have their units upgraded to new 'Sturmbrigaden' – assault brigades. Three of these would be formed in total: 5. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade 'Wallonien', 6. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade 'Langemarck' and 8. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade 'Frankreich'.

Each would be paired with an existing division and would begin to be equipped with heavy weapons, such as artillery, anti-tank guns and



# The first wave of volunteers

MOTIVATED BY A VARIETY OF REASONS TO VOLUNTEER TO JOIN THE NAZI WAR EFFORT, MEN FROM OCCUPIED EUROPE BECAME EMBROILED IN THE FIGHTING IN THE USSR

Even as the Wehrmacht was fighting its way across Belgium, the Netherlands and France in May 1940, the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, gave the order to establish two new regiments – the SS-Westland and SS-Nordland. Each was to be recruited from foreign volunteers; the former from the Netherlands and Belgian Flanders, the latter from Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Volunteers had to be aged between 18-25, physically fit, have no criminal record and be of 'Aryan' descent.

Intended to be 3,000 men strong, neither unit reached this mark, and native Germans were drafted in to make up the numbers. They were then combined with an existing German SS regiment, 'Germania', to form the SS-Wiking Division under the command of Felix Steiner. Following the invasion of the communist Soviet Union in June 1941, the Nazis embarked on a new recruitment drive to form a series of national legions for what they were now calling the 'crusade against Bolshevism'.

These units would wear German uniform and carry German weapons, but would be officered by non-Germans and sometimes even issue orders in their own languages. Four legions were established by the Waffen-SS; the Norwegian 'Legion Norwegen', the Dutch 'Legion Niederlande', the Belgian Flemish 'Legion Flandern' and the Danish 'Freikorps Danmark'. The German Army founded two of its own units from nationalities not considered 'Aryan' enough by the SS; the Belgian Walloon Légion Wallonie (officially entitled Infanterie Bataillon Nr. 373) and the French Légion des Volontaires Français contre le bolchevisme (LVF).

The reasons men came forward varied; the most common was a powerful sense of anti-communism, and for the Flemish a hope

that the Nazis would reward their service with independence. For some it was a desire for adventure and a belief in the promises made in the recruiting offices.

Well over a thousand men enlisted for each legion, only for some to leave during training when many of the promises made to them were broken, and they realised that a lot of their German comrades considered them 'inferior' as soldiers. Sent to the Eastern Front in the winter of 1941/42, the French and Walloons went to central and southern Russia, carrying out rear-area security duties and fighting partisans. The SS legions went north; the Norwegians, Flemish and Dutch to help lay siege to Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and the Danes to fight alongside the SS-Totenkopf (Death's Head) Division in the Demyansk Pocket.

The fighting was brutal. One of the Danish volunteers, Magnus Møller, remembered the death in action of his commanding officer: "The next thing, he stood on a mine and bang, off it went and blew him up. His right leg was completely gone, and he was lying there, and then the Russians attacked again... a shell landed right where he was, and that was it – he was gone, just gone, in an instant." Bjørn Østring, a Norwegian, fought at Urizk outside Leningrad. "The other side of the barbed wire... seemed like some sort of 'moving carpet' consisting of dead and wounded Russian soldiers. The air was filled with screams, and it was impossible to hear any orders or commands from anyone," he reported.

Stories of German mistreatment of volunteers and the length of the casualty lists slowed the flow of replacements to a trickle, and just 18 months after their creation the legions were withdrawn and disbanded. The first wave of recruitment was over.

*Dutch Waffen-SS volunteers leave the Netherlands by train, 1942/43. The Dutch provided the largest number of recruits from western Europe*



*French Waffen-SS volunteers leave Paris by rail bound for a training camp, August 1944. The Anglo-American forces were racing for the city by then*



*A Danish Freikorps Danmark colour party on parade in spring 1941. The Freikorps would have its baptism of fire in the Demyansk Pocket*

even, in the case of the Flemish Langemarck, self-propelled guns – the poor man's panzers. The Wallonien and Frankreich were, as you'd expect, composed of Walloons and Frenchmen respectively, which was another big departure from the past – under the new rules both were now considered 'racially acceptable' and were transferred en masse to the Waffen-SS from the army, whether they liked it or not.

## The SS-Nordland & SS-Wiking

For the Scandinavians, the decision was made to concentrate most of them into a new division; 11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrrenadier-Division 'Nordland'. This unit would have two regiments of grenadiers; the Danmark and Norge, for Danes and Norwegians respectively, and an entire battalion of panzers – the 'Hermann von Salza', named after the medieval grand master of the Teutonic Knights.

The Nordland was sent to occupied Yugoslavia to form up and train – the hope being that it could do so in relative peace, but that wasn't something Josip Tito's communist Partisans were going to allow. After one particular skirmish, their German corps commander, Felix Steiner, issued an order praising the courage of one Danish volunteer: "SS-Unterscharführer N.O. Christensen... after heavy fighting with superior numbers of the enemy on 22nd November 1943, fell into the hands of the Bolsheviks. Before they could search him, he reached into his trouser pockets, in which he had two hand grenades, and set them both off. The explosion shattered SS-Unterscharführer Christensen, the four SS men standing

**Right:** Two Scandinavian volunteers with their hands raised – a Norwegian left, a Dane right – swear their oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler in spring 1941





## HITLER'S ELITE

*An MG 42 operated by the  
SS-Wiking Division on the  
Russian front in 1943*







“ I SAW A COSSACK ATTACK WITH MY OWN EYES,  
ALL OF THEM ON HORSEBACK AND WAVING THEIR  
SABRES. THEY CHARGED TOWARDS US, IT WAS MADNESS,  
I COULDN'T BELIEVE WHAT I WAS SEEING... WE MOWED  
THEM DOWN, DOZENS AND DOZENS OF THEM... IT WAS JUST  
SLAUGHTER, THE MACHINE-GUNS SHREDDED THEM”



# Europe's SS volunteers

MEN FROM ACROSS THE CONTINENT CAME FORWARD TO FIGHT FOR THE NAZIS

## NORWAY LEGION NORWEGEN

SS-Schijaeger Bataillon  
SS-Polizei-Schijaeger-Bataillon 506. (mot.)  
5. SS-Panzer-Division 'Wiking'  
11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer Grenadier-Division 'Nordland'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 6-7,000**

## UNITED KINGDOM

Britisches Freikorps - Legion of St George

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: <60**

Thomas Cooper, who was half-German through his mother, was the only Briton to receive a Nazi battlefield decoration during the war - in his case the Wound Badge in Silver.

## SWEDEN

No Swedish-only unit was ever formed. The limited number of volunteers mainly served with their fellow Scandinavians in the SS-Wiking Division, and latterly, 11. SS-Panzer Grenadier-Division 'Nordland'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 300**

## ESTONIA

Estnische SS-Legion  
Estnische SS-Freiwilligen-Bataillon 'Narwa'  
Estnische SS-Freiwilligen-Brigade  
20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (estnische Nr.1)

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 25,000**

## LATVIA

15. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (lettische Nr.1)  
19. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (lettische Nr.1)

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 80,000**

## DENMARK FREIKORPS DANMARK

5. SS-Panzer-Division 'Wiking'  
11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer Grenadier-Division 'Nordland'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 10,000**

## NETHERLANDS LEGION NEDERLANDE

4. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer Grenadier-Brigade 'Nederland'  
23. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer Grenadier-Division 'Nederland'  
34. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 'Landstorm Nederland'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 50,000**

## ITALY

Waffen-Grenadier-Brigade der SS (italienische Nr.1)  
29. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (italienische Nr.1)

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 15,000**

## BELGIUM

FLEMISH - LEGION FLANDERN

6. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade 'Langemarck'  
27. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 'Langemarck'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 15,000**

WALLOON - LÉGION WALLONIE

5. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade 'Wallonien'  
28. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 'Wallonien'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 10,000**

## FRANCE

Légion des Volontaires Français contre le bolchevisme (LVF)

8. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade 'Frankreich'  
33. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS 'Charlemagne'

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 20,000**



Men from the SS-Wiking Division in action in a Soviet village



around him, and all of the Bolsheviks surrounding him.”

As for the Dutch – the largest non-German contingent in the Waffen-SS – they formed their own unit of almost divisional-size: 4. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer Grenadier-Brigade ‘Nederland’.

The winter of 1943-44 found all the western European units, bar the Frankreich, which was still under formation, called to the Eastern Front for their toughest test yet.

## The winter battles

In the south, the SS-Wiking and its partnered assault brigade, the Wallonien, were encircled in a pocket at Cherkassy near the Dnieper River, along with almost 40,000 German soldiers. When a relief attempt failed, a breakout was ordered but only succeeded in part – both the Wiking and Wallonien managed to escape, but casualties were horrific as the men desperately sought to escape.

A Russian officer, Major Kampov, described the flight: “Hundreds and hundreds of cavalry were hacking at them with their sabres, and massacred the Fritzies as no one had ever been massacred by cavalry before. There was no time to take prisoners.

“It was the kind of carnage that nothing could stop till it was over. I had been at Stalingrad, but never had I seen such concentrated slaughter as in the fields and ravines of that small bit of country.”

**“IT WAS CARNAGE... I HAD BEEN AT STALINGRAD, BUT NEVER HAD I SEEN SUCH CONCENTRATED SLAUGHTER AS IN THE FIELDS AND RAVINES OF THAT SMALL BIT OF COUNTRY”**

Meanwhile, the Flemings of the Langemarck were paired with the 2. SS-Panzer-Division ‘Das Reich’ and tasked with breaking the encirclement of First Panzerarmee at Kamenets-Podolsky, a feat they achieved, before being almost destroyed at Yampol.

Hundreds of kilometres north, the siege of Leningrad was finally lifted as the Red Army surged forward in January. The Nordland found itself acting as a ‘fire brigade’, rushing from place to place trying to halt the Soviet advance. John Sandstadt, a Norwegian in the Norge, recalled the fighting: “On the day of the first major Soviet attack our company had a strength of 118 men: seven reichsdeutsche NCOs, 34 volksdeutsche soldiers, 1 Flemish Unterscharführer and 76 Norwegians... our counterattack in the morning completely collapsed under Soviet crossfire. We immediately lost 13 dead and many wounded... My brother Olav... fell in the Kosherizy area after five days. His last resting place was in the former divisional cemetery near Begunizy, between St Petersburg and Narva... after twelve days, on January 27 1944, our company consisted of one Obersturmführer, 5 NCOs and some 35 men.”

## Narva – the ‘battle of the European SS’ & the French

After the heavy fighting around Leningrad, the Germans fell back to Estonia and set up a defensive position near the Narva River and the twin Hermannsburg and Ivangorod fortresses

on either bank. For the next six months the fighting would seesaw until it came to a climax in late July, by which time so many non-German units were involved that the battle became known as that of the ‘European SS’, although they were always in a minority overall. Danes and Norwegians of the Nordland were there, as were the Dutch of the ‘Nederland’ and Estonians of 20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (estnische Nr. 1), defending their homeland. The last contingent to arrive was a small kampgruppe (battlegroup) from the Langemarck. The Flemings had been withdrawn to rest and refit after Yampol, but the military situation was so dire that a few hundred were sent north anyway.

The reason the picture was so bleak was due to the overall military position of the Third Reich that summer. Rome had fallen, and Anglo-American forces had advanced into the north of Italy. ‘Festung Europa’ – ‘Fortress Europe’ – had been breached with the enormous success of the Allied landings in France on D-Day, while in the east the Soviets had launched the incredibly successful, but still little known, Bagration offensive, four years to the day after the German invasion of their country. That offensive had annihilated an entire German army group of 35 divisions and was taking the Red Army to the pre-war borders of Poland and Romania. Two of the units trying to slow their advance were the Frenchmen of the LVF and the Frankreich.

Both fought hard and losses were steep; in the Frankreich, of the 1,000 men who went into action 137 were killed, and total casualties amounted to no fewer than 15 of the 20 officers and 831 of the 980 other ranks.

Back on the Narva, a large Soviet offensive in late July necessitated a retreat from the river to a prepared position



A Dutch Waffen-SS member of the SS-Legion Niederlande training with a sniper rifle



based on three hills in Estonia's Blue Mountains; Orphanage Hill, Grenadier Hill and Love's Hill. During the retreat a whole regiment of Dutch volunteers was caught in the open and massacred. When Orphanage Hill fell to a Soviet attack, the Flemish volunteer Remi Schrijnen won a Knight's Cross after stopping the assault in its tracks.

## 1944 – stretching the SS elastic

Even as Nazi territory shrank in 1944 the Waffen-SS grew, with another 19 divisions added to the roll, although most were divisions in name only and were of little combat value. An additional Bosnian Muslim division was created, 23. 'Kama', as was an Albanian Muslim formation, 21. 'Skanderbeg'. Various other remnants, conscripts and third-tier units were suddenly transformed into SS divisions; among them the Hungarian ethnic German 25. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS 'Hunyadi', the Italian 29. and Russian 30. Waffen-Grenadier Divisions, and the 35. SS und Polizei-Grenadier Division, made up of unemployed Ordnungspolizei men.

The Waffen-SS was now at its zenith in terms of pure numbers, its membership standing at around 600,000. However, this wasn't reflected in its military effectiveness.

The remaining western European volunteers were now viewed by the Waffen-SS hierarchy as veterans and as suitable cadres around which to build yet more divisions – buttressed by the large numbers of now-refugee collaborators, paramilitaries and fellow travellers who had been forced to leave their own countries as liberation neared.

In a last flourish, the Belgians, French and Dutch all achieved divisional status. The Flemish became the 27. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 'Langemarck', the Walloons the 28. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 'Wallonien', the French the 33. Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (französische Nr. 1) 'Charlemagne', and the Dutch formed two divisions no less; the 23. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrrenadier-Division 'Nederland', and the 34. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 'Landstorm Nederland'.

## The nightmare ends

The 'old' Waffen-SS divisions – the Leibstandarte, Das Reich and Totenkopf among others – were still tough opponents, but as the jaws of the western Allies and the Soviets closed in around Berlin, most of them were far away, fighting in Austria. Those units of the armed SS who were closest to Berlin were nearly all comprised of the western European volunteers.

The Belgians of the Wallonien were smashed on the Oder River at Altdamm, and their comrades of the Nordland were sent reeling back into the city as the Soviet fronts of Marshals Zhukov and Konev fought their way forward. The few hundred surviving Danes and Norwegians of the Danmark and Norge regiments found themselves the mainstay of Berlin's defences, even as Soviet artillery started bombarding the city.

To the south of the Nazi capital, a couple of thousand Frenchmen were being reorganised into some sort of fighting unit after a torrid time in Pomerania, eastern Germany (now part of modern-day Poland). A few months earlier, having been brought up to a strength of around 8,000 men with former Miliciens, ex-LVF and Frankreich men, and christened the 'Charlemagne', the new French division had been shipped east to fight the Soviets. Almost from the train, they had met disaster, being split into three parts by repeated Red Army attacks, with each trying to escape west. The majority had ended up as prisoners or casualties.

Now the order arrived to form a kampfguppe from the best men and all available weapons, and head into the city before it was cut off. So



“THE WAFFEN-SS WAS NOW AT ITS ZENITH IN TERMS OF PURE NUMBERS, AT AROUND 600,000. HOWEVER, THIS WAS NOT REFLECTED IN ITS MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS”

## Knights of the legions

SEVERAL FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS RECEIVED THE KNIGHT'S CROSS OF THE IRON CROSS



### REMI SCHRIJNEN SS-STURMBRIGADE 'LANGEMARCK'



Born in the Belgian village of Kuntich in 1921. A Flemish nationalist, he joined the Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (VNV) as a teenager. After Belgium's occupation he tried to join the Waffen-SS but was initially refused for being too short. Finally, he reached the Legion Flandern and served on the Russian Front. During the battle of Narva in July 1944 he single-handedly stopped a Soviet tank attack and was awarded the Knight's Cross.

### HENRI FENET 33. WAFFEN-GRENADIER DIVISION DER SS (FRANZÖSISCHE NR. 1) 'CHARLEMAGNE'



Born in 1919, the bespectacled Fenet served as an officer in the French army and was captured by the Germans in 1940. After service with the collaborationist Milice, he joined the Waffen-SS in 1944 and fought in Pomerania. As the Soviets closed in on Berlin, he was one of a few hundred French soldiers who volunteered to defend the city as part of the 'Sturmabteilung Charlemagne'. Wounded in the foot, he was awarded the Knight's Cross by Wilhelm Mohnke just before the city fell.





Dutch volunteers of the Waffen-SS during training exercises in spring 1941

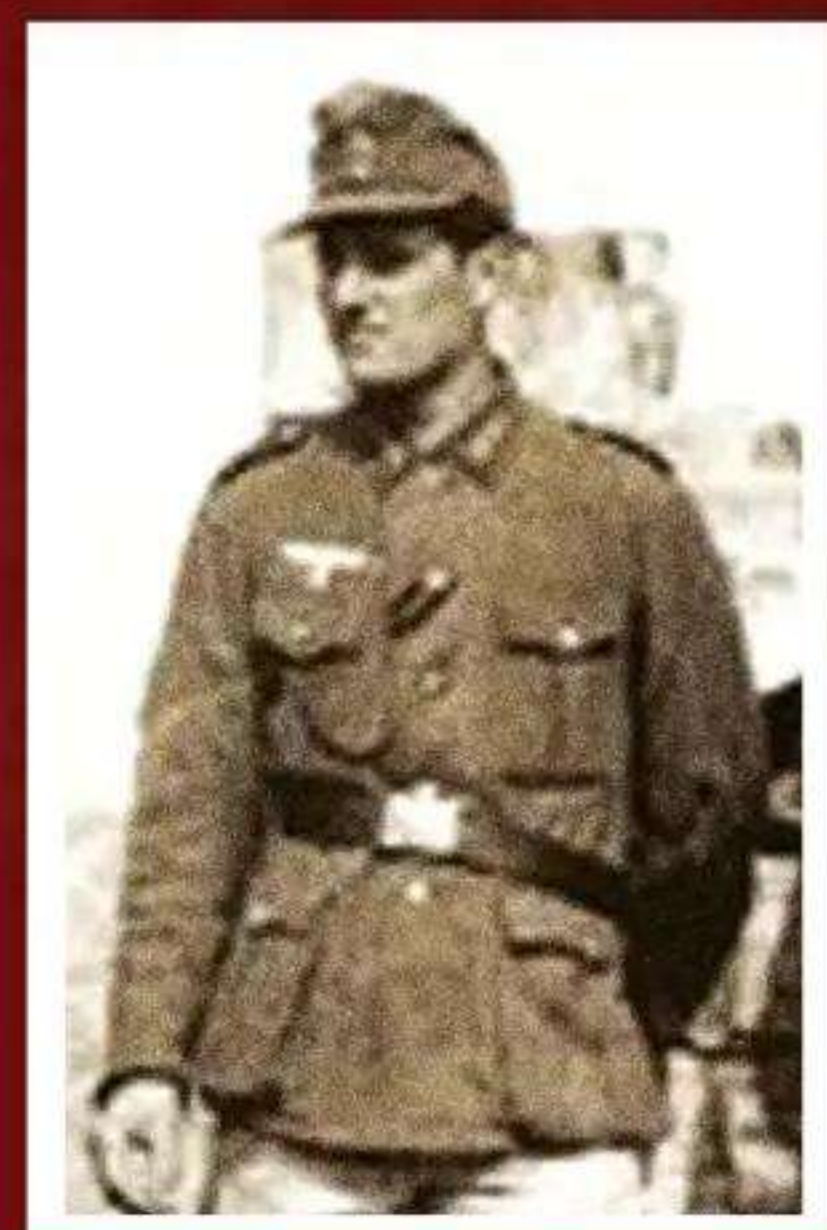
Below: The Belgian Walloon Waffen-SS leader, Léon Degrelle, leads his men on patrol on the Eastern Front, 6 October 1944, his Knight's Cross round his neck



Right: An officer and men of the Freikorps (or Frikorps in Danish) Denmark, pictured in 1941

## EUGÈNE VAULOT

33. WAFEN-GRENADIER DIVISION DER SS (FRANZÖSISCHE NR. 1) 'CHARLEMAGNE'



Born in Paris in 1923, Vaultot was a plumber before enlisting in the LVF in 1941. Wounded in action in Russia, he was discharged but enlisted once more, this time in the Kriegsmarine. Transferring to the Charlemagne, he volunteered to defend Berlin, and during the battle was credited with destroying as many as

eight Soviet tanks with panzerfausts, for which he became one of the last ever Knight's Cross recipients. He was killed trying to escape the city.

## EGON CHRISTOPHERSEN

SS-PANZERGRENADIER-REGIMENT 24 'DANMARK'



Born in Strøby, Denmark in 1919, Christophersen joined the SS-Wiking along with his brother, Viggo, who was killed in Yugoslavia in 1943. While serving in the Danmark at the battle of Narva in June 1944, Egon personally led a counterattack with a handful of men to retake the

crucial Outpost Sunshine strongpoint. For this act he became the first ever Scandinavian volunteer to be awarded the Knight's Cross.

## GERARDUS MOOYMAN

LEGION NEDERLANDE



Born in Apeldoorn in the Netherlands in 1923, Mooyman joined the Legion Nederlande and served in northern Russia. During the Soviet Lake Ladoga offensive of February 1943, he commanded a self-propelled anti-tank gun. When the Soviets broke through the lines, Mooyman and his crew destroyed 13 Soviet tanks in one day, halting the attack. He became the first non-

German foreign volunteer to be awarded the Knight's Cross and was feted in the Nazi press. He died in a car accident in the Netherlands in 1987.





1943 – the staff company of the Bosnian Muslim 13. SS-Handschar Division practise drill. One of the most bizarre units the Waffen-SS to be formed, it was also the only one where some men mutinied

‘Sturmabteilung Charlemagne’ was formed, with around 500 men loaded onto trucks and driven into Berlin even as Nazi rule entered its death throes. A hundred or so didn’t make it, their transports breaking down or losing their way in the maelstrom of refugees.

The rest, under the Charlemagne’s German commander, Gustav Krukenberg, reached Berlin and were combined with the remnants of the Nordland to defend the eastern section of the city near Tempelhof Airport. The fighting was bitter – the Danes, Norwegians and Frenchmen counterattacking in the Neukölln district before being pushed back towards their Stadtmitte U-Bahn headquarters. Erik Wallin, a Swede in the Nordland, remembered what they were up against: “There was no limit to their tank forces. The infantry we saw less and less of though. Time after time we realised that the forces ranged against us were exclusively tanks, assault guns and entire battalions of Stalin Organ rockets. There wasn’t an infantry soldier amongst them.”

Amid the burning buildings and rubble, the French grenadiers in particular earned themselves a reputation for the close-quarters destruction of Soviet tanks; three of the Sturmabteilung’s members were awarded the Knight’s Cross as a result.

The end came quickly. After Hitler’s suicide, a breakout was attempted by the garrison, only for most of them to be killed or driven back. With no hope of relief, on 2 May 1945 General Helmuth Weidling surrendered the city to the Soviet commander, Vasily Chuikov. Most of the surviving defenders surrendered with a mixture of relief and trepidation; relief that it was all over and they were still alive, but also fearing what Soviet captivity would hold for them. For French volunteer Roger Albert-Brunet, that captivity would last a

**BELGIAN JUSTICE! IT WAS NO JUSTICE AT ALL! WE JUST FOUGHT FOR FLANDERS, AGAINST BOLSHEVISM – THAT’S ALL WE DID – WHAT IS SO WRONG ABOUT THAT?”**

matter of hours before he got his answer as to how he would be treated, receiving a bullet to the head from a Soviet soldier.

Some of the foreign volunteers decided to try and escape following their surrender. A Norwegian, Bjørn Lindstad, knew two such men: “Two of the Norge Regiment’s panzergrenadiers, Lage Sjøgaard and Kasper Sivesind... Sjøgaard was captured in Berlin by the Russians but managed to escape when his guards got drunk, and he made it safely to the British Embassy. As for Sivesind, he hid in a cellar for a week, living off stolen food and licking water that was dripping down into the corner of the cellar. Then, one night, he escaped from the city, got to the north German coast and hitched a lift on a boat to Denmark, where he was arrested.”

Hans-Gösta Pehrsson and Erik Wallin, two of the tiny number of Swedish SS men, also made it out. They heard of an official crossing-point over the Elbe River at Wittenberge for displaced foreigners trying to get home. Trekking to the site, alternatively dodging or bluffing their way past Red Army checkpoints, the two men posed as Italian refugees and smuggled themselves onto a ferry. “The feeling of having at long last got out of the range of fire from the Red Army

was overwhelming. We reached the other bank and were greeted by laughing British soldiers, with the words, ‘Welcome back to civilisation!’”

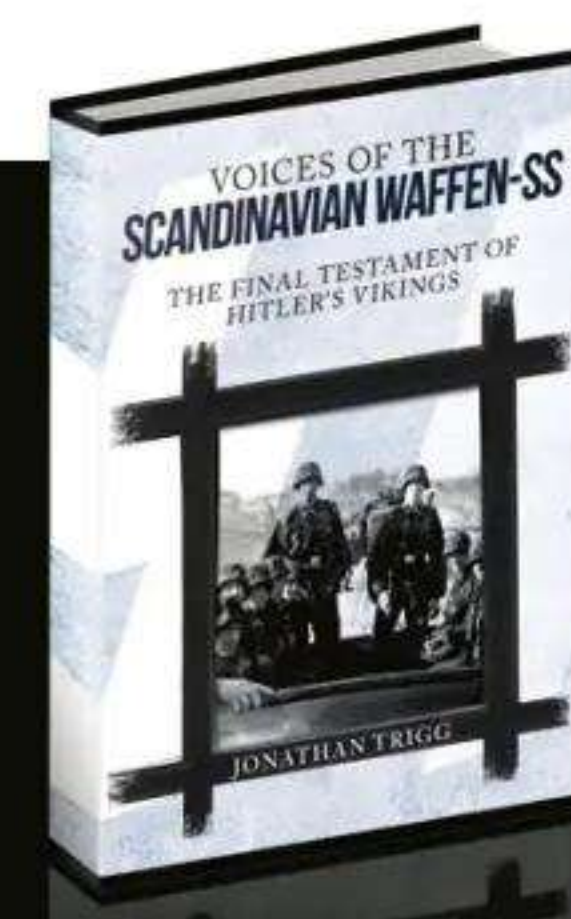
The majority of volunteers who got home were arrested, tried and convicted of collaboration; something they are still bitter about even today, feeling they did little wrong. As two Flemish volunteers, Theo D’Oosterlinck and Dries Coolens, made clear, “Belgian justice! It was no justice at all! We just fought for Flanders, against Bolshevism – that’s all we did – what is so wrong about that?”

Regardless, most spent several years in prison and a number were executed. Decades on, only a few – now in their 90s or beyond – are still alive.

No article that discusses the Waffen-SS can avoid mentioning the Holocaust and the evils of Nazism. It was the SS that carried out the mass murder of millions of Jews, among others, and it is a historical fact that certain members of the Waffen-SS participated in atrocities – not least the massacres of prisoners of war at Le Paradis and Malmédy, and of civilians at Oradour-sur-Glane. Almost all the volunteers themselves deny any hand in committing murder and claim they were just soldiers.

Magnus Møller, a Dane, spoke for most of them: “What did I think of the Russians? The Russian soldiers weren’t good or bad, they were just the enemy you know, killing them was just a job, that was all, a job. You killed them or they killed you – simple.”

**Voices of the Scandinavian Waffen-SS – The Final Testament of Hitler’s Vikings, by Jonathan Trigg, is available now**





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# OTTO SKORZENY

## HITLER'S ATTACK DOG



Meet Nazi Germany's special forces pioneer – a scar-faced killer who was once called 'the most dangerous man in Europe'

WORDS NICK SOLDINGER

**I**n 1928, while a student at Vienna Technical College, 20-year-old Otto Skorzeny got what he most wanted in life: facial disfigurement. Schmisse – or honour scars – were trophies that many young German and Austrian men coveted in the early 20th century. Earned in ritualised university fraternity duels, the winner was often considered to be the man who walked away with the fetishistic injury rather than the one who inflicted it. In the warped cult of German militarism, a scarred face was seen as a badge of courage, proof that a would-be warrior was prepared to offer part, or perhaps all, of his body for sacrifice to a greater cause.

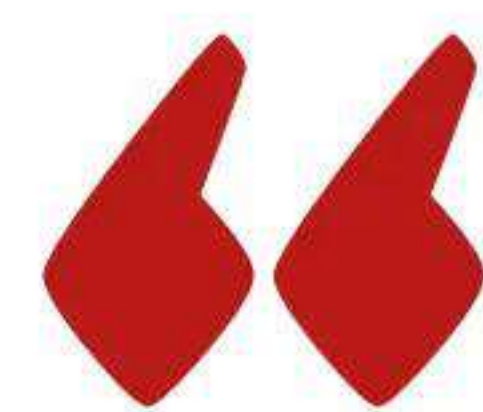
The huge scar that marred Skorzeny's face and that he'd see every morning in the mirror for the rest of his life also left a profound mental mark on him. As the man who'd go on to be the pioneering leader of the Nazi special forces would later reveal: "My knowledge of pain, learned with the sabre, taught me not to be afraid, and just as in duelling when you must concentrate on your enemy's cheek, so too in war. You cannot waste time on feinting and sidestepping. You must decide on your target and go in."

Otto Skorzeny was born into a prosperous Viennese family on 12 June 1908. His father ran an engineering works that struggled in the wake of World War I. With the collapse of the

Habsburg Empire and the Austrian economy, Otto grew up in a household of austerity and fading grandeur. These were tough times for the nation, and the elegant Viennese streets were frequently used as stages for violent clashes between conflicting political groups. Skorzeny – an upper middle-class militarist drenched in 19th-century nationalism – was only ever going to pick one side.

In 1932, having graduated from college and now running his own struggling engineering business, Skorzeny went to Vienna's Engelmann Arena to hear leading German Nazi Joseph Goebbels give a speech. Hitler's articulate understudy explained everything – why Austria was struggling, why good Aryan folk were suffering unfairly, and how all that could be fixed – so clearly, in fact, that Skorzeny joined the party on the spot.

When the Austrian government banned the Nazi party in the following year amid violence and plots, Skorzeny joined the



MY KNOWLEDGE OF PAIN, LEARNED WITH THE SABRE, TAUGHT ME NOT TO BE AFRAID, AND JUST AS IN DUELLING WHEN YOU MUST CONCENTRATE ON YOUR ENEMY'S CHEEK, SO TOO IN WAR"



*Skorzeny's prominent facial scar, like his Knights Cross and Iron Cross, were all badges of honour for him*





HITLER’S ELITE

Vienna Gymnastics Club instead. This right-wing paramilitary organisation often added its muscle to police clampdowns of left-wing demonstrations, and Skorzeny soon became known as a capable street fighter. It was a reputation that would pay out big time once he began his military career.

In 1938, in a foreboding act of international thuggery, Hitler forcibly incorporated Austria into the Nazi State via the so-called Anschluss. A year later, after doing the same thing in Czechoslovakia, and then Poland, Nazi Germany pushed the world into war. Skorzeny immediately tried to enlist. He initially tried the Luftwaffe, but at 31 and six foot four, was

considered too old and too tall for aircrew. So instead he volunteered for the Waffen SS as an officer cadet.

Ambitious from the beginning, Skorzeny used his engineering background to impress his superiors by designing ramps that could be used to load tanks onto ships. He was soon serving with SS Das Reich – an elite armoured division – as a technical officer, seeing action in Holland and France in 1940. During the invasion of Yugoslavia the following year he was promoted to First Lieutenant after capturing 54 enemy soldiers.

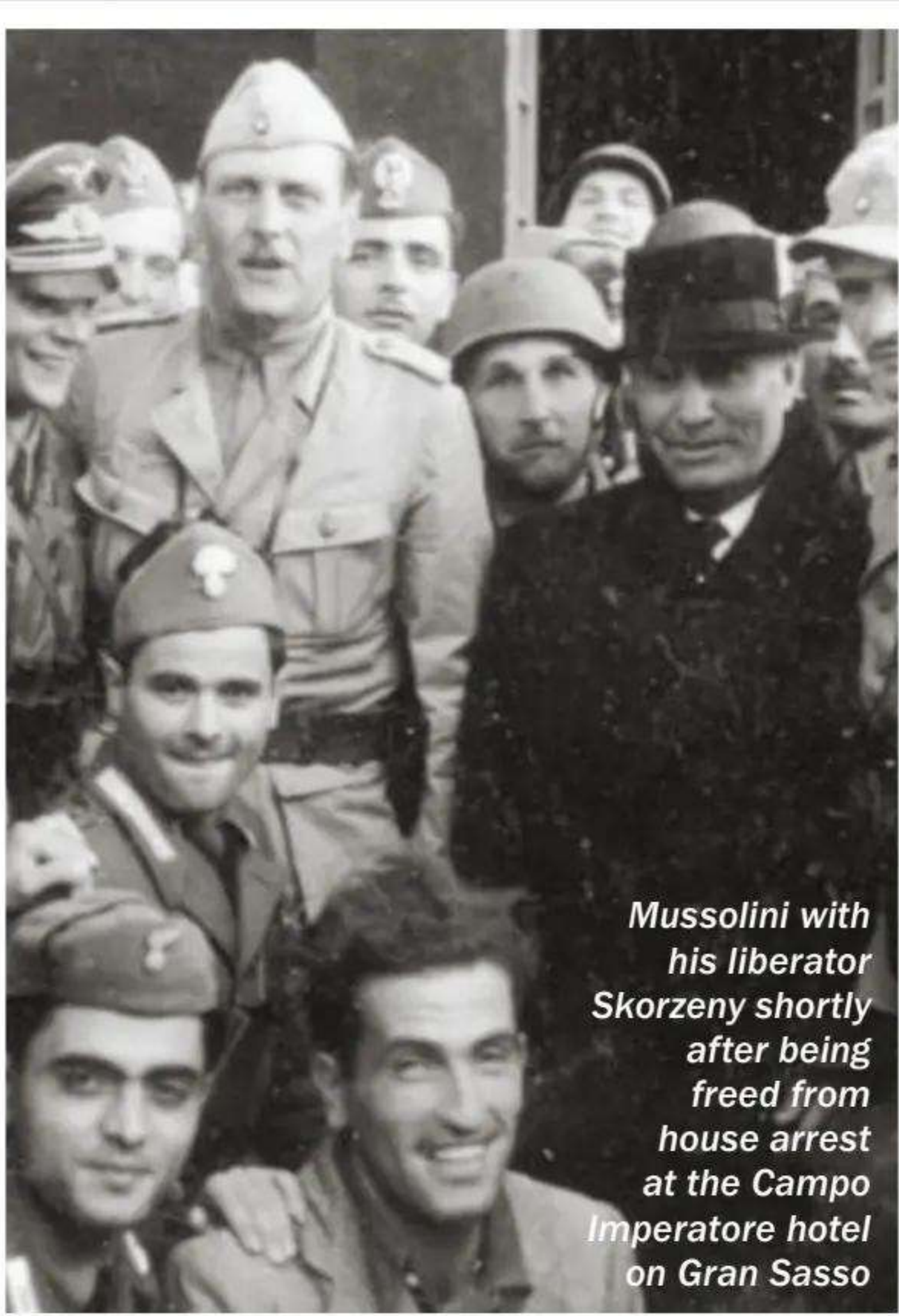
Two months later, Operation Barbarossa was launched. The vast Nazi crusade against

the Soviet Union saw more than 3 million men march eastward on a front that stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. SS Das Reich – with Skorzeny in its ranks – was at the very point of the blade now stabbing into Russia.

As an engineering officer, Skorzeny’s chief task was maintaining Das Reich’s vehicles, but being on the sharp end of the biggest operation in military history, he was inevitably going to see a lot of combat. He did, right up until December, when the Germans’ merciless advance was finally frozen by the Russian winter. By then, the Germans had advanced so far into the USSR that Stalin could hear Das Reich’s guns from his bedroom window in the



*The landing zone for Skorzeny’s gliders on Gran Sasso left little margin for error. In total he lost three of his 12 planes in the operation*



*Mussolini with his liberator Skorzeny shortly after being freed from house arrest at the Campo Imperatore hotel on Gran Sasso*



*Skorzeny’s commandos shortly after their successful mission to free Mussolini. The Gran Sasso Mountains can be seen behind them*



## HIT IN THE BACK OF THE HEAD BY ARTILLERY SHRAPNEL, HE REFUSED ALL TREATMENT EXCEPT FOR A BANDAGE AND A GLASS OF SCHNAPPS"

Kremlin. The time was ripe for a massive Soviet counter offensive.

As the Soviets hit back hard, the Germans experienced their first major casualties of the campaign. Skorzeny was among them. Hit in

the back of the head by artillery shrapnel, he refused all treatment except for a bandage and a glass of schnapps, and was soon back with his unit. Like the scar on his face, the holes in his skull were another medal that marked him out. His conspicuous heroics that day won him the Iron Cross – the first of many laurels. However, his time with regular soldiering was coming to an end. His head wounds were serious, and despite his protests to the contrary, he was shipped back to Berlin to convalesce.

By this time, pioneering British commando raids on mainland Europe were taking German lives and grabbing headlines. Skorzeny was inspired. Giant armies could be stopped by

the weather and dragged into costly attrition battles. Yet small groups of dedicated soldiers could hit their enemy hard, fast and effectively. Skorzeny read everything he could on unconventional combat. He also began talking to anyone who would listen about his fervent take on guerrilla warfare.

In early 1943, his ideas came to the attention of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the new head of Reich security. Kaltenbrunner's predecessor, Reinhard Heydrich, had been assassinated by British-trained Czech commandos, so was only too aware of the effectiveness of this new type of soldier. As a former Austrian Nazi chief, he also remembered Skorzeny from his days as an enforcer on the streets of Vienna,

# Raid on Drvar

## WHEN SKORZENY'S PLAN TO KILL YUGOSLAV PARTISAN LEADER TITO WAS COMPROMISED, A DARING, AND ULTIMATELY DISASTROUS, ALTERNATIVE WAS DEvised

In Spring 1944, Skorzeny's unit was assigned to Operation Knight's Move, a raid intended to capture Yugoslav partisan leader Josip Tito. The leader was based in the fortified Bosnian

mountain town of Drvar. Skorzeny was tasked with planning the raid, and after obtaining information from a partisan deserter that pinpointed Tito's headquarters in a cave outside the town, proposed he infiltrate Drvar with a

small team and assassinate Tito. Skorzeny's plan, however, was compromised by a security breach, and instead a combined airborne and ground assault was ordered that Skorzeny refused to endorse. The subsequent raid on Drvar was a disaster.



### 1. INITIAL BOMBING RAID

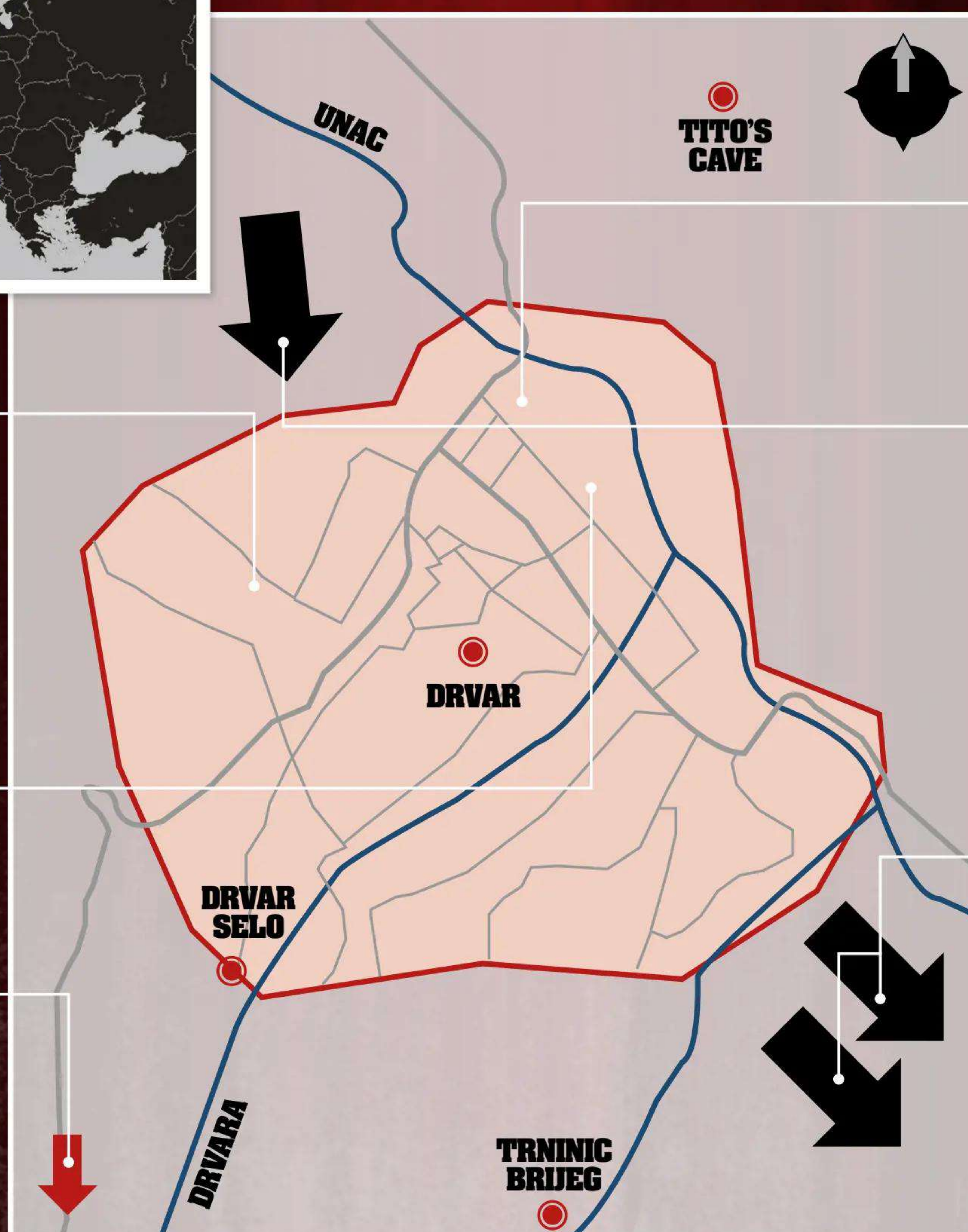
25 May 1944. 6.35am. Five Luftwaffe bomber squadrons, including Ju 87 dive bombers, begin hitting targets in and around Drvar. A total of 440 sorties are flown throughout the day.

### 2. FIRST AIRBORNE ASSAULT

7am. 654 men of the 500th SS Parachute Battalion arrive by 'chute and glider, seizing Drvar by 9am. They then push north towards Tito's cave, suffering casualties.

### 3. TITO ESCAPES

Tito, along with his guests Churchill's son Randolph and the novelist Evelyn Waugh, then a commando, had been whisked away and were soon safely aboard HMS Blackmore in the Adriatic.



### 4. SECOND AIRBORNE ASSAULT

Noon and another 220 paratroopers arrive. By now, Tito has escaped and the partisans are counter-attacking in force. The Germans withdraw to a cemetery and dig in for the night.

### 5. GROUND FORCE ASSAULT

26 May. 12.45pm. Having spent the previous 24 hours trying to punch their way through to Drvar, German motorised columns of the XV Mountain Corps finally relieve the beleaguered paratroopers.

### 6. THE WITHDRAWAL

Having suffered about 1,800 casualties, the Germans pull out, having achieved nothing more impressive than capturing Tito's uniform and slaughtering about 2,000 civilians. Skorzeny's refusal to lead the raid is vindicated.



## HITLER'S ELITE

and recommended he be put in charge of developing the Nazis' first commando unit.

By April 1943, Skorzeny, newly promoted to captain, was head of Germany's first special-forces unit. Named after their training area near Berlin, they were called the Friedenthal Hunting Group. That summer, Otto was sent to Iran with the objective of recruiting local tribes to disrupt Allied trade routes to the Soviet Union. By July, Skorzeny had come to the attention of Hitler and on 26 July he was summoned to the Führer's secret HQ in East Prussia – the Wolf's Lair. Skorzeny's unit was about to get its second assignment – it was a mission that would make Skorzeny famous.

Two days before Hitler's meeting with Skorzeny, the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was arrested by his own people and removed from power. Concerned that Italy might drop out of the war, Hitler demanded his oldest ally be reinstated. When the new Italian government refused, Hitler ordered Il Duce be rescued before he could be handed over to the Allies – Skorzeny, he decided, was the man to do it.

The mission was so secret that the only people given clearance were the Nazi leadership, Skorzeny's unit, select members of the Luftwaffe and paratroopers from General Kurt Student's elite airborne forces, who were to support the mission.

The outfit shipped out for Italy, arriving in early August and establishing a base at the Pratica di Mare Airfield near Rome. The hunt for Mussolini then began. Wild rumours circulated as to where he might be, with the tiny island of Ponza, off Italy's west coast, and Sardinia the most likely destinations. Several aerial and sea-borne reconnaissance missions followed – including one during which the plane Skorzeny was in was shot down – but all proved fruitless.

By early autumn, time was running out. On 3 September 1943, Allied forces landed on



*Skorzeny and Hitler at the Führer's secret HQ in East Prussia: the Wolf's Lair. Skorzeny was frequently summoned for meetings with Hitler*

## Howl at the moon

**THE THIRD REICH PLANNED A PRO-NAZI INSURGENCY TO FIGHT ON AFTER IT COLLAPSED. ITS FIGHTERS WERE TO BE KNOWN AS WEREWOLVES**

Operation Werewolf was dreamt up by SS Chief Heinrich Himmler. In late 1944, with the Allies closing in on all sides, he made plans for 5,000 volunteers from the Waffen SS and the Hitler Youth to carry on the fight behind enemy lines as the Reich's lands fell. Once an area had been overrun, so-called Werewolf Battalions would draw weapons from pre-positioned caches and conduct a guerrilla war against the occupying armies.

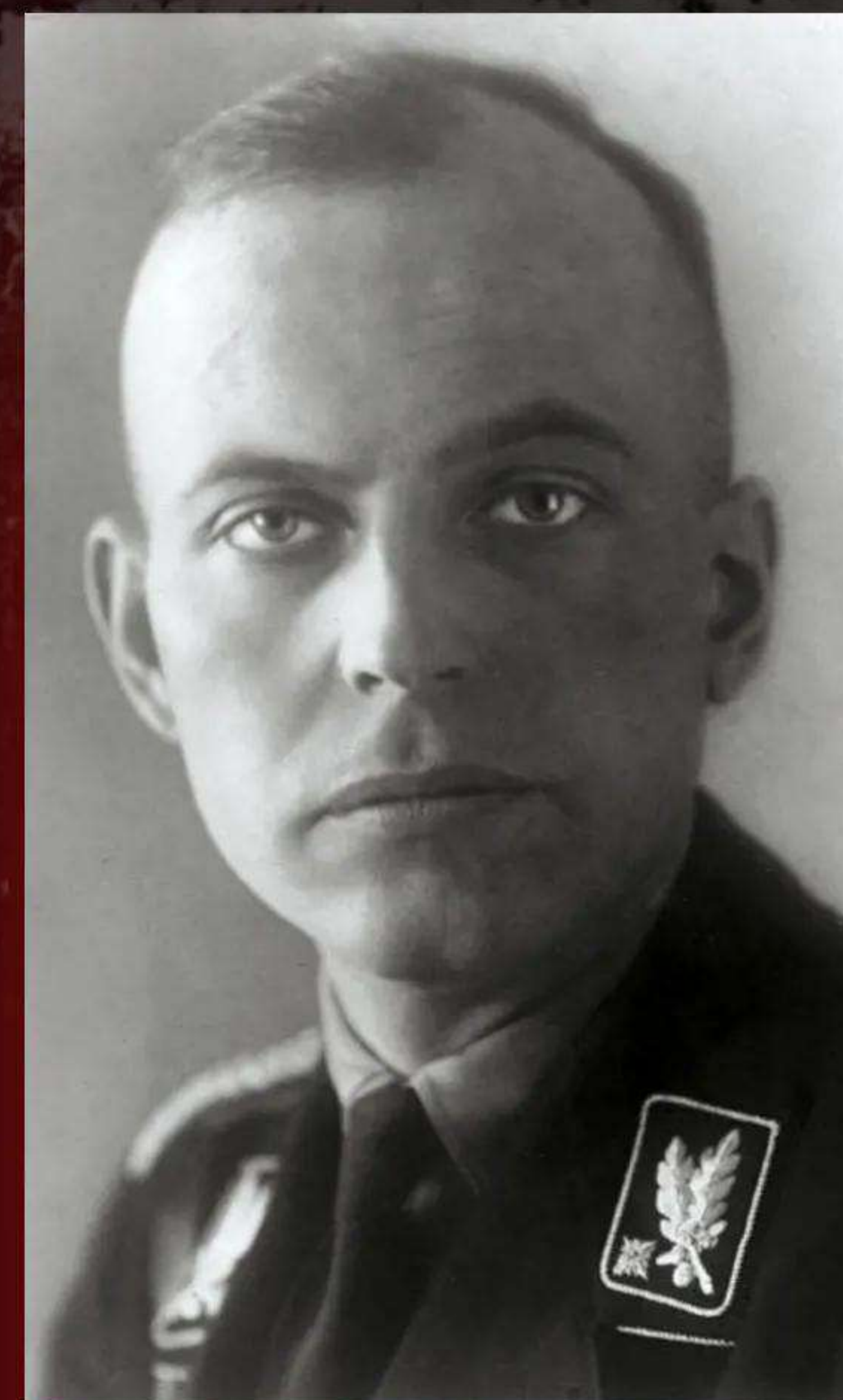
The operation was put under the command of a fanatical SS officer called Hans-Adolf Prützmann, who had become something of an expert in guerrilla tactics after spending three years fighting Ukrainian partisans. A training centre was established at Hülchrath Castle on the Rhine, and here volunteers were instructed in demolition, sabotage, hand-to-hand combat and infiltration techniques. The plan was to have the forces ready by early 1945 and to establish a headquarters high in the Bavarian Alps.

The operation's name was pinched from a book called *Der Wehrwolf*. Written in 1910 by Hermann Löns, a novelist popular in Nazi circles, it tells the

story of a good German peasant who goes on the rampage against foreign invaders after they killed his family during the Thirty Years' War.

Far from life imitating art, however, Operation Werewolf failed to deliver on Himmler's promise of an armed insurgency that would keep the Nazi nightmare alive. Operations were sporadic at best, although the Nazis made a great deal of their minor and often invented exploits in the dying days of the war. Goebbels even established Radio Werewolf to broadcast phoney news reports in between wild appeals for the war-weary German civilian population to rise up against the occupying Allies.

Prützmann killed himself just as the war ended, and Skorzeny was lined up to lead the insurgency – but none materialised. Germany had been fighting almost continuously for six years. It'd suffered 3.5 million military casualties and nearly 750,000 civilian ones. Its elegant cities had been reduced to rubble while the Nazis' insatiable appetite for killing machines had left its economy exhausted. Germany had become a country entirely sick of war.



*Above: Shortly before the end of the war, Hans-Adolf Prützmann was captured by the Allies. He took his life while in custody*





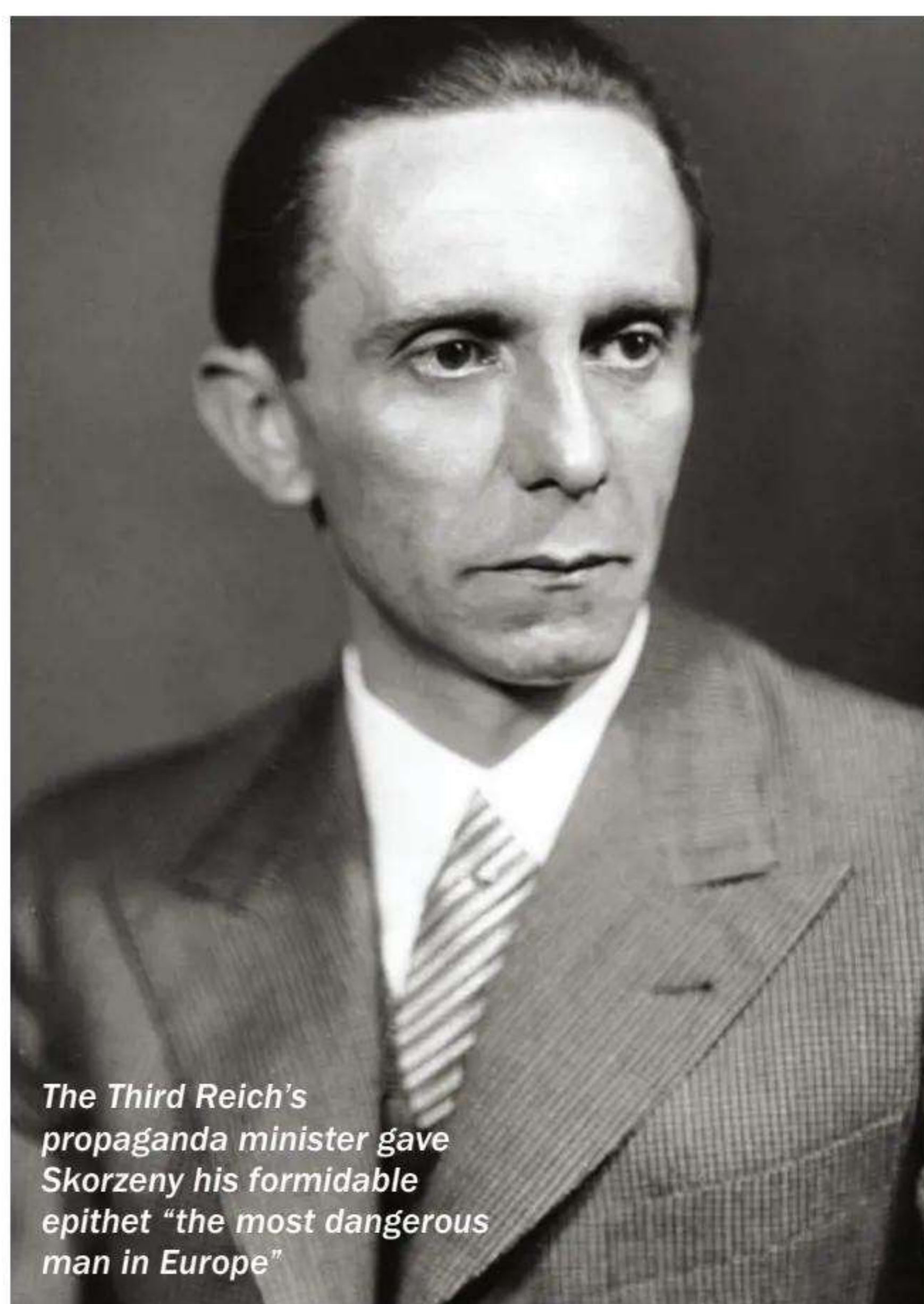
the Italian mainland at Salerno, and a few days later the Italian government surrendered. Hitler's response was to immediately send German troops south to hold the line, but what he really wanted was Italy back in the war. At about this time, Skorzeny's men intercepted a radio signal indicating a large security operation around the Gran Sasso mountains north east of Rome. The area was famous for its ski resort and in particular a luxury hotel complex that was only accessible via cable car. After a further bit of nosing around, Skorzeny became convinced that this was where Mussolini was being held.

On 8 September, Skorzeny had an aerial reconnaissance of the hotel undertaken. It showed that although the hotel was totally isolated, there was a small open area nearby that might serve as a landing zone for gliders. Skorzeny drew up a plan. He'd bring his men in by glider, seize the hotel, and grab Mussolini. Meanwhile, Student's paratroopers would drive to the cable station at the foot of the mountain and capture it. Mussolini could then be brought down to it by cable car and flown to safety. It was audacious – and highly risky. When he shared it with the Luftwaffe officers on his team, they gloomily predicted an 80 per cent casualty rate. Skorzeny, though, was undeterred. If there was any chance Operation Oak, as he codenamed the raid, could succeed, he'd lead it – whatever the odds.

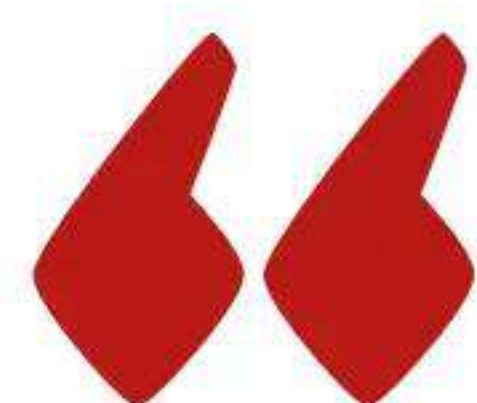
The operation was scheduled for 12 September. Skorzeny's troops were to land next to the hotel at 7am when winds on the mountain would be lightest. They planned to go from an airfield near Gran Sasso, but when the planned morning arrived, so did a fleet of US bombers, which punched holes right across the airstrip. The mission was delayed. The first of Skorzeny's 12 gliders didn't get off the ground until 12.30pm, while one actually crashed on takeoff as they struggled along the crater-filled runway.

Skorzeny flew in the lead aircraft, accompanied by Italian Military Police General Fernando Soleti. Mussolini was being guarded by Italian Military Police and Skorzeny hoped the presence of one of their generals would dissuade the guards from opening fire. With what remained of their depleted 90-strong force airborne, 30 of Student's paratroopers now raced by road to the Gran Sasso's lower cable station, seizing it at 12.45pm.

With the escape route secure, the gliders began the treacherous descent onto the tiny Gran Sasso landing strip, which was, they realised as they got closer, strewn with rubble and rocks. Remarkably, the pilot of Skorzeny's glider managed to land it less than 20 metres from the hotel. Pushing General Soleti out in front of him, Skorzeny rushed towards the building. The Italian guards watched on stunned. Within minutes Mussolini was found in a room guarded by two Italian officers. Without a shot, he was handed over to Skorzeny who, with typically theatrical aplomb, announced, "Il Duce, the Führer sent me to set you free!"



The Third Reich's propaganda minister gave Skorzeny his formidable epithet "the most dangerous man in Europe"



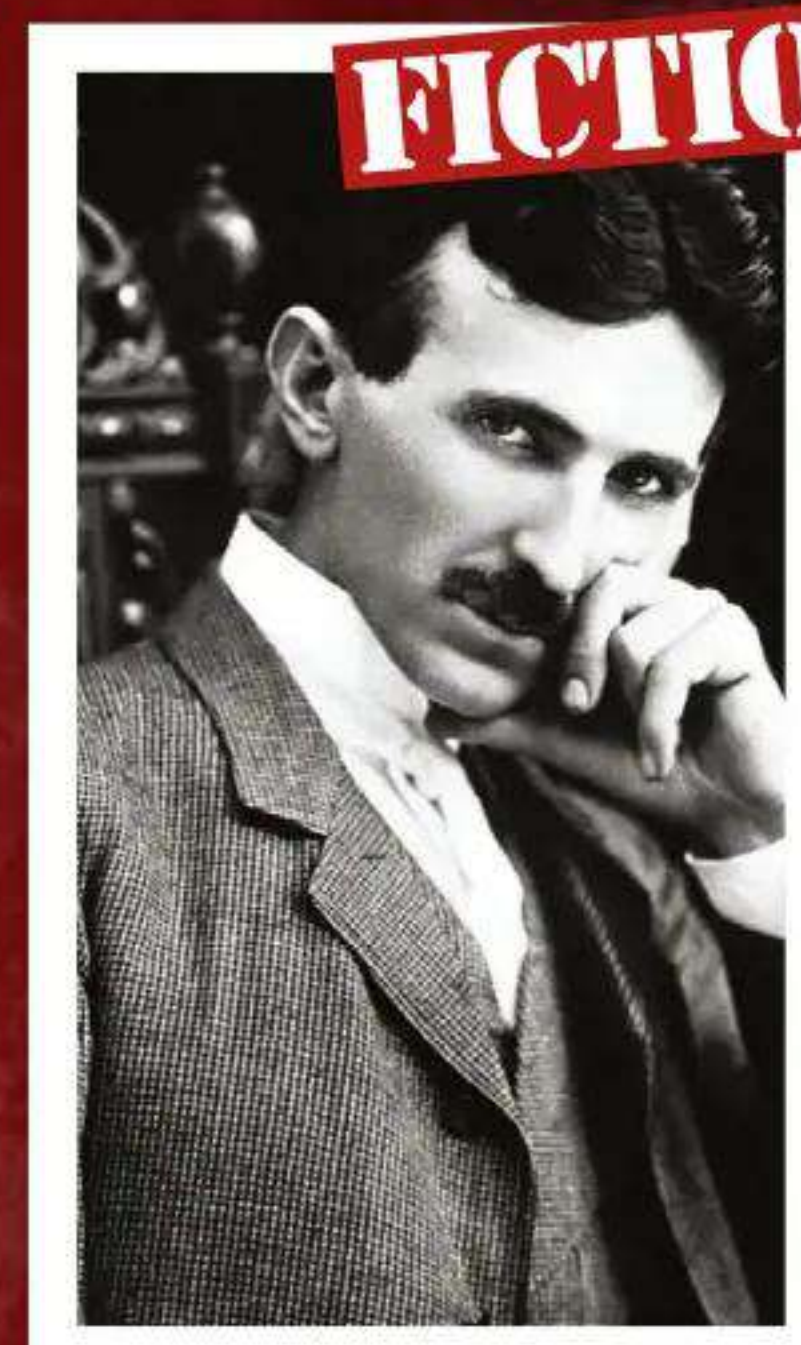
IF THERE WAS ANY CHANCE OPERATION OAK, AS HE CODENAMED THE RAID, COULD SUCCEED, HE'D LEAD IT – WHATEVER THE ODDS"

# Rumours

FACT OR FICTION? THE FIVE MADDEST STORIES EVER TO CIRCULATE ABOUT OTTO SKORZENY – EUROPE'S MOST DANGEROUS MAN

## HE ASSASSINATED NIKOLA TESLA

The great physicist Nikola Tesla, who created the AC electrical supply system, was according to some working on a 'death ray' machine when his body was found in a New York hotel room in 1943. According to others, Skorzeny broke in, strangled Tesla and stole the scientist's research.



FICTION

## HE MET CHURCHILL AFTER THE WAR

According to some 'historians', Winston Churchill holidayed in Italy in 1951 in order to secretly meet with Skorzeny. It's claimed that Skorzeny had some letters that Churchill had sent to Mussolini that painted the British PM in a fascistic light. He apparently swapped them for the release of Skorzeny's former SS comrades from prison.



FICTION

## HE PLANNED TO KILL EISENHOWER

During the Battle of the Bulge, such was the chaos successfully caused by Skorzeny's false-flag operation that rumours began to fly that Skorzeny was actually on his way to Versailles to murder the Allied Supreme Commander General Dwight D Eisenhower. Security around the general was actually doubled as a result.

FICTION

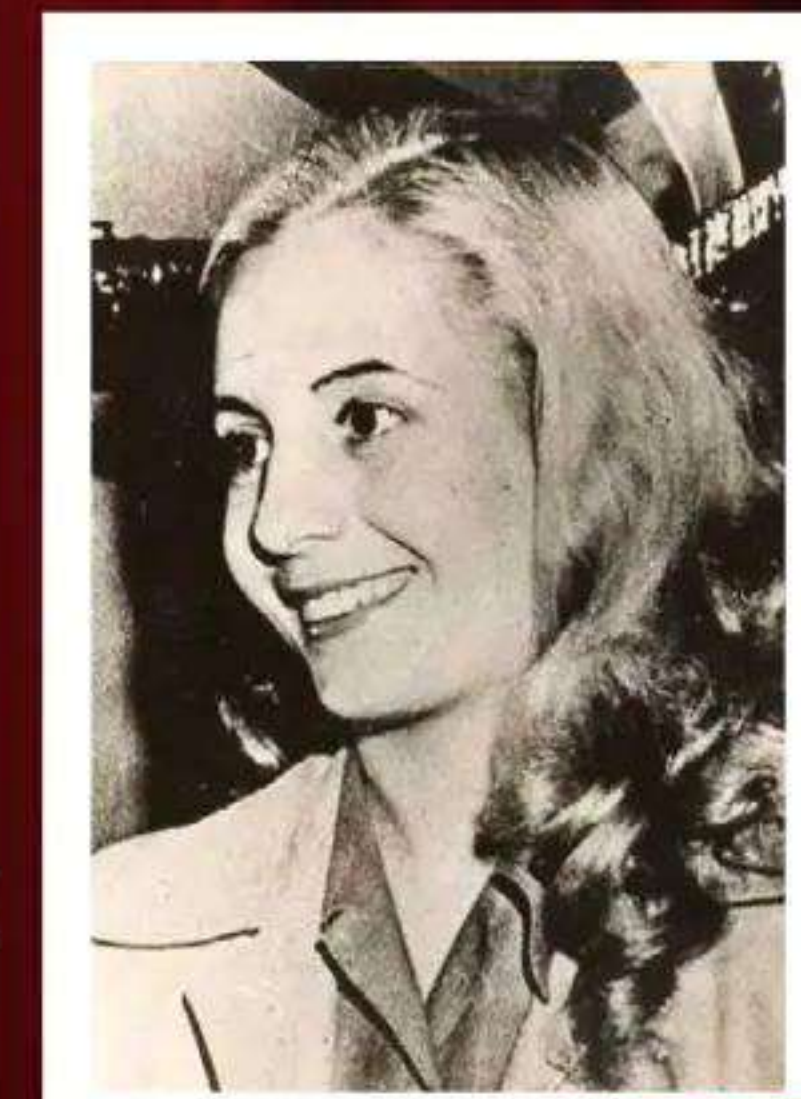
## HE ESCAPED FROM PRISON

When British agent Forest Yeo-Thomas revealed during Skorzeny's trial in 1947 that British commandos had also worn enemy uniforms during the war, Skorzeny was acquitted of war crimes. Sent to an internment camp, he was then busted out by former SS cronies dressed as US guards, and went on the run.

FACT

## HE HAD AN AFFAIR WITH EVA PERÓN

After the war, as a stateless citizen, Skorzeny helped former Nazis find refuge in South America. His connections there eventually led him to work for Argentina's fascist dictator Juan Perón, and it's claimed while in Buenos Aires Skorzeny had an affair with his wife, the famous Eva (Evita) Perón.



FACT, POSSIBLY





One of Skorzeny's men is tied to a stake before being executed by firing squad, after being captured during Operation Grief



Left: Skorzeny was tried as a war criminal at the Dachau Trials in 1947

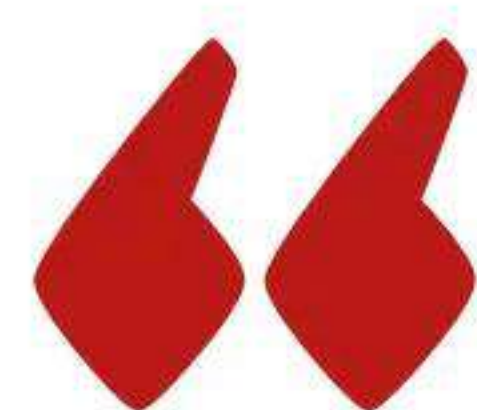
Mussolini was flown to the Wolf's Lair. Here, he was persuaded to return to Northern Italy to set up a puppet republic and carry on the fight. Skorzeny, meanwhile, was loaded up with even more badges of courage. Promoted to major, Hitler hung the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross around his neck. Mussolini, meanwhile, pinned the Order of the 100 Musketeers to his chest, while Reichsmarschall Goering – not to be outdone – also threw in the Gold Medal of the Luftwaffe for good measure.

Skorzeny was now a bona fide Nazi superhero. Joseph Goebbels, the man who'd inspired Skorzeny to join the party all those years before, and now Reich propaganda minister, milked the extraordinary saga of Mussolini's rescue for all its worth. "Skorzeny," Goebbels told the German people, "is the most dangerous man in Europe." At a time when the German people had little else to celebrate, Skorzeny's spectacular success was a huge boost to morale. Even Churchill had to tip his Homburg to the scar-faced Austrian commando, telling the House of Commons that the raid had been "one of great daring."

Almost exactly a year later, on 10 September 1944, Hitler summoned Skorzeny to the Wolf's Lair once more for another daring mission. By now, Germany was clearly losing the war, and Hungary, its last remaining European ally, looked like it might soon fold. Hitler had discovered that their leader Admiral Horthy was about to negotiate a separate peace with the Soviets, and Skorzeny was instructed to find a way of persuading Horthy and Hungary to stay by Hitler's side.

The admiral, based in a heavily armed palace on the heights of Castle Hill overlooking Budapest, had been persuaded by his son Miklós to run up the white flag rather





## SKORZENY HAD PROVEN THAT THE ACTIONS OF A FEW DETERMINED MEN COULD AFFECT THE FATE OF MILLIONS”

than risk Hungary's further destruction. But who did the admiral love more – his country or his son? To find out the answer to that, Skorzeny was ordered to kidnap Miklós. The Nazis would then hold him hostage to see if Admiral Horthy might then change his mind.

Skorzeny arrived in Budapest on 15 October. Having learned that Miklós was secretly meeting with Soviet representatives at a house in Budapest's back streets, he acted with a fencer's decisiveness. The meeting had barely begun when Skorzeny's men attacked the house. After a brief fire fight, Miklós was captured, wrapped in a carpet and spirited away to Germany, where he'd spend the rest of the war as a prisoner.

Horthy, though, didn't blink. He denounced the kidnapping and stated that an armistice with the USSR would take place immediately. Skorzeny responded with absolute ruthlessness. Leading a convoy that included four tiger tanks up Castle Hill to Horthy's palace, he bluffed his way past the barricades until he was finally challenged and stopped at the last barrier. By then, though, it was too late. Skorzeny's force stormed the palace and, at a loss of less than 20 of his men, seized power. Horthy was arrested and replaced by Hitler acolyte Ferenc Szálasi. Hungary would be forced to fight on to the end of the war at a terrible cost. Once again, though, Skorzeny had

proven that the actions of a few determined men could affect the fate of millions.

Skorzeny's last great contribution to the war came during Hitler's last great gamble – his attempt to bust through the Allied lines and retake the vital port of Antwerp in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. On 16 December 1944, two German panzer armies stabbed their way through the Allied front lines. They pierced it in exactly the same place that they'd done four years previously – the Ardennes Forest. The region was no better defended than it had been in 1940 and again the Allies were caught totally by surprise.

At the very tip of the attack were Skorzeny's special forces. Dressed in American uniforms and driving in captured vehicles, his men – many also fluent in English – were tasked with spreading confusion among the Allied troops. As the brutal offensive raged on in the cold and the snow, Skorzeny's men wreaked chaos. Dressed as US military policemen, they misdirected traffic, ordered units to turn back and changed signposts.

With the deception plans playing their part, the American front line began to collapse. The adverse weather conditions stymied Allied air superiority and within days thousands of American GIs had been taken prisoner. As rumours flew of enemy infiltrators, the US response to the crisis was further hampered,

with every soldier and vehicle subject to roadblocks and rigorous checking.

Short on fuel and supplies, however, it was only a matter of time before Hitler's last-gasp offensive ran out of clout. When the weather finally lifted, and the Allies were once again able to control the skies, Hitler's troops were slaughtered in the snow as they were chased back to the German border. Although Skorzeny escaped unscathed, many of his men – captured wearing US uniforms – were executed as spies.

In early April 1945, Skorzeny was summoned to Berlin for the last time. Hitler awarded him oak leaves to his Iron Cross and ordered him to the Bavarian mountains. The resistance forces of the Nazis' so-called 'Werewolf' battalions were gathering there, Hitler told him, and Skorzeny was to take charge of them and continue the fight. Skorzeny escaped Berlin just as the Soviets tightened their noose around the city's neck, reaching the Nazi heartland in the south a few days later. When he arrived, however, he discovered no army to command. It was just another phantom force spat out by Hitler's garbled imagination in the final days of his madness.

On 30 April, news reached Skorzeny that Hitler had blown his brains out while Berlin burned around him as the rampant Soviets, thirsty for revenge, closed in. Ten days later, with the war lost and nowhere left to run, Skorzeny gave himself up. His arrest made headlines around the world. Skorzeny, the great hoarder of awards, had himself become a trophy.

# Skorzeny's global terror

AFTER THE WAR, SEEMINGLY ANSWERABLE TO NO ONE, SKORZENY CONTINUED TO CAUSE TROUBLE AND MADE A FORTUNE IN THE PROCESS

## MIDDLE EASTERN POWER BROKER

Skorzeny was reportedly involved in organising mercenary groups made up of former SS men throughout the Middle East. Some place him in Egypt around the time of the country's standoff with Britain over the 1952 Suez crisis, while others credit him with helping Gaddafi establish his grip on Libya in 1969.

## DIE SPINNE

While hiding out on a Bavarian farm in the late 1940s, Skorzeny set up the secret organisation Die Spinne. Dedicated to smuggling former SS men out of Europe via secret escape routes, known as ratlines, to South America or the Middle East. He may have helped up to 600 escape justice.

## THE PALADIN GROUP

Skorzeny, who died in 1975, spent much of his later life under the protection of Spain's General Franco. Based in Alicante, he established the Paladin Group, an international outfit that specialised in guerrilla training. His clients included the South African government, the Greek Military Junta of 1967–74, as well as Franco's regime.

## OPERATION LONG JUMP

When Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt met in Iran for the Tehran Conference of 1943, it is thought that Skorzeny may have been given orders to attempt to assassinate them. The truth about the operation, codenamed Long Jump, remains shrouded in mystery. It was either called off after a security breach or was simply a scare story.





## HITLER'S ELITE

*This famous image of an unknown German soldier was taken during the Nazi counter-offensive in the Ardennes*





# LAST STAND OF THE WAFFEN-SS



In the closing months of the war in Europe, the Waffen-SS fought desperately to secure Hitler victory. When they failed he disowned them

WORDS ANTHONY TUCKER-JONES

**O**utside the battered Reichstag the sound of artillery and small arms fire echoed across the ruins of the Königsplatz. The building shook as chunks of stone were torn off in great showers of debris. Inside cowered the remains of Heinrich Himmler's mighty Waffen-SS. How had his private army that once numbered almost 40 divisions been reduced to this? Hitler, in the closing months of World War II, vainly hoped that the Waffen-SS could turn the tide on both the Western and Eastern Fronts. Ever since the assassination attempt on his life on 20 July 1944 he had refused to trust the German armed forces – especially the army.

Instead Hitler put his faith in Himmler's Nazi fanatics and it was the SS who spearheaded his last two offensives. First in the Ardennes to halt the British and the Americans, and then in Hungary to stop the Soviets. These operations represented Hitler's last stand yet both were

characterised by poor planning and political infighting. The result was defeat and Hitler angrily denounced the SS. It was only in the dying days of the Third Reich, as they fought to defend the Nazi capital, that Hitler found it in his suicidal heart to thank the SS.

## Rejuvenated SS

The Allies became aware in late September 1944 that Hitler was withdrawing his armour from the Western Front to build up a very large panzer reserve. Intelligence indicated that the 1st SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, 2nd SS Das Reich, 9th SS Hohenstaufen and 12th SS Hitlerjugend Panzer Divisions were being refitted for renewed combat. Most notably, the two SS Panzer Corps were swiftly rebuilt as the strike force of SS-Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich's new 6th Panzer Army. This was not officially designated an SS army until 1945 as it also included army divisions.



Right: Troops from Panzergrenadier-SS Kampfgruppe Hansen advance in Belgium, December 1944

Far right: A Waffen SS Panzer IV advances through smoke, during campaigning on the Eastern Front, 1942



Images © Alamy, Getty



Men from Kampfgruppe Peiper are pictured just 13km from Malmedy in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944

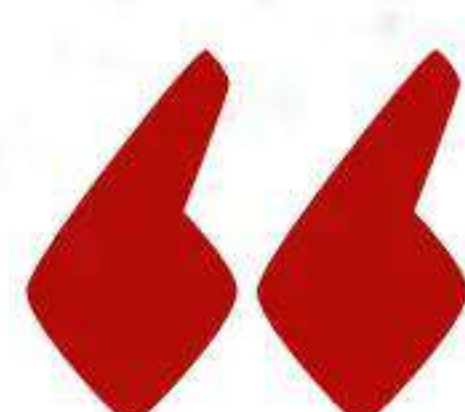


The two panzer divisions of SS-Gruppenführer Herman Priess' I SS Panzer Corps were each brought up to about 22,000 men; Leibstandarte was supplemented with Tiger II tanks of the 502 SS-Heavy Panzer Battalion and Hitlerjugend, now under SS-Brigadeführer Hugo Kraas, was rebuilt though lacked experienced junior officers. Das Reich, re-assigned to SS-Gruppenführer Heinz Lammerding, and Hohenstaufen re-assigned to SS-Brigadeführer Sylvester Stadler, of SS-Obergruppenführer Willi Bittrich's II SS Panzer Corps, were similarly rebuilt with better than average recruits, though Hohenstaufen lacked transport.

Hitler's regenerated forces included Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army with a total of 450 tanks, assault guns and self-propelled guns and General Hasso von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army supported by about 350 armoured fighting vehicles. The 7th Army under General Erich Brandenberger only had a few battalions of tanks and assault guns. Antwerp was their goal: 6th Panzer Army was to breakout between Liège and Aachen and 5th Panzer Army between Namur and Liège. It was an all-or-nothing gamble.

## Dietrich flabbergasted

Dietrich, who answered to Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief West, was flabbergasted at the scope of the operation. "Reach the [River] Meuse in two days, cross it, take Brussels, go on and then take Antwerp?" he exclaimed. "And this little programme is to



**I RECEIVED FEW REPORTS FROM SEPP DIETRICH... AND WHAT I DID RECEIVE WAS GENERALLY A PACK OF LIES"**

be executed in the depths of winter in a region where... we will have snow up to our middles. Do you call that serious?" He hoped to reason with Hitler, but the Führer would not see him.

Dietrich was acutely aware that although the SS panzer divisions had been rebuilt they were not what they had once been, bitterly observing: "Out of all the original Adolf Hitler Division there are only 30 men who are not dead or prisoners." Hitlerjugend, after its losses in Normandy, was only able to field one mixed tank battalion for the offensive consisting of two companies of Panzer IVs and two companies of Panthers. The division also committed its two panzergrenadier regiments and its anti-tank battalion. Powerful Kampfgruppe Peiper, drawn from Leibstandarte, consisted of 100 Panzer IVs and Panthers, 42 formidable Tiger IIs and 25 assault guns.

Kampfgruppen from Leibstandarte and Hitlerjugend conducted Dietrich's opening attacks to the north along the line St Vith-Vielsalm on 16 December 1944. They did so under dense cloud, avoiding the attentions of the Allies' fighter-bombers. One excited Leibstandarte tanker leant out of his turret and yelled cheekily to a comrade in a neighbouring panzer: "Goodbye, lieutenant, see you in America!" Another soldier rather optimistically

shouted: "Wait till we get to Paris and all those sweet little French cheetahs."

Hitlerjugend failed to force the Americans from the Elsenborn Ridge and had to swing left. On the northern shoulder Hohenstaufen headed northward after breaking through the Losheim Gap; frustratingly only the artillery regiment and reconnaissance battalion were initially committed, though once St Vith was captured the rest of the division was brought up. On 18 December Hohenstaufen reached their official start line and fought their way toward Manhay and Trois Ponts before being replaced. They got as far as Salmchateau – less than halfway to the Meuse.

## Blame the Waffen-SS

Failing to take Bastogne slowed Von Manteuffel's drive on the Meuse. St Vith fell on 21 December but American artillery fire forced Dietrich's and Von Manteuffel's divisions to become entangled. By 22 December Hohenstaufen was committed to the southern flank of Leibstandarte, but they were unable to reach Kampfgruppe Peiper. His force was eventually surrounded and destroyed, leaving 45 tanks and 60 self-propelled guns north of the Amblève River. At the end of the month Hohenstaufen were replaced and moved south to help with the assault on Bastogne.





**Right:** Waffen-SS troopers enjoy a rare moment of rest during their last-ditch efforts to save the Third Reich from defeat

**Far right, top:** Despite inflicting heavy casualties on Allied forces in the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans were eventually driven back

**Far right, bottom:** Two SS men observe enemy movements during fighting against the Soviets in Estonia, June 1944



Soldiers from the 2nd SS-Panzer Division Das Reich walk past the burning wreckage of an American convoy near Manhay, Belgium



However, once the weather cleared the Allied aircraft revved up and began mercilessly attacking the exposed panzers.

Even in the face of defeat Das Reich continued to inflict heavy losses on their American adversaries. Just before Christmas, Normandy veteran SS-Untersturmführer Fritz Langanke, taking his Panther tank into battle, recalled, "Thanks to our preparations we knocked out the first five Sherman tanks in quick succession despite the poor visibility... The firing distance between us was 500 and 700 metres."

Time, though, was running out for the SS as the Americans relieved Bastogne on 26 December and launched a counterattack on 2 January 1945. Although their tanks were

driven off their infantry broke through German positions, reaching Michamps. Hitlerjugend's escort company and 1st Battalion, 12th SS-Panzer Regiment were sent to counterattack under the command of another Normandy veteran SS-Obersturmführer Rudolf von Ribbentrop. He recaptured Michamps and, along with the fighting at Arlencourt, Hitlerjugend accounted for 24 American tanks. They were then thrown at the north-eastern outskirts of Bastogne but the Americans turned back every attack. Shortly afterwards Hitlerjugend was withdrawn to Cologne. By now Hohenstaufen and Hitlerjugend only had 55 tanks left between them.

In the New Year Dietrich was dismayed that his SS divisions were handed over to Von

Manteuffel to help take Bastogne. Initially Leibstandarte, then the whole of I SS Panzer Corps, were assigned to 5th Panzer Army. By 4 January 1945 Hohenstaufen had also been reassigned, leaving Dietrich with just Das Reich as his sole armoured unit. On 8 January Hitler finally ordered a partial withdrawal. By the end of the month his Ardennes bulge had vanished for the loss of 100,000 casualties and most of his armour; 5th and 6th Panzer Armies lost up to 600 tanks. Field Marshal von Rundstedt did all he could to blame the Waffen-SS: "I received few reports from Sepp Dietrich ... and what I did receive was generally a pack of lies."

## Hungarian misadventure

Dietrich was summoned to Berlin in late January 1945, where he met General Heinz Guderian, Army Chief of Staff. They agreed that all available troops should be sent immediately to defend the Oder. The Red Army was already over the river at Wriezen near Küstrin, just 72km (45 miles) from Berlin. Yet Hitler had other plans for Dietrich and his panzers in Hungary. The Führer was convinced if Operation Spring Awakening caught the Soviets by surprise, they could be driven back. He wanted to attack between Lake Balaton and Lake Velence to split Marshal Tolbukhin's 3rd Ukrainian Front in two.

Under Army Group South's direction the now officially dubbed 6th SS Panzer Army and 6th Army, supported by the Hungarian 3rd Army, were to attack, while the IV SS Panzer Corps, with 4th SS Totenkopf and 5th SS Wiking



This flag from an SS unit made up of volunteers from Norway was captured by US troops in Possenhofen, Germany, April 1945



Divisions, held the Margarethe defences around Balaton. On paper 6th SS Panzer Army was still a formidable force, with Leibstandarte and Hitlerjugend grouped under I SS Panzer Corps, while Das Reich with Hohenstafen formed II SS Panzer Corps. In reality these units were exhausted.

On the morning of 6 March 1945 the 6th SS Panzer and 6th Armies struck Tolbukhin's defences after a 30-minute artillery bombardment. As planned, they launched a three-pronged assault, with 6th SS Panzer Army striking in a south-easterly direction between the lakes.

The Hungarian plain between the northern extremity of Balaton and the Danube bisected by canals and drainage ditches was not good tank country. Dietrich was furious as he had given assurances that the ground in front of his two panzer corps was passable. Instead the mud claimed almost 150 panzers, which sank up to their turrets. The II SS Panzer Corps penetrated the Soviet defences to a depth of just 8km (five miles), while I SS Panzer Corps managed 40km (25 miles).

Das Reich joined the fight with its 250 panzers on 8 March 1945, followed by Hohenstafen the next day, bringing the total of panzers committed to the battle up to 600. However, Dietrich was rapidly running out of time and resources. On 11 March he contacted Hitler's headquarters requesting permission to call off Spring Awakening; he repeated his request three days later.

His pleas fell on deaf ears.

Just as the Ardennes offensive wasted the last of Germany's military resources on the Western Front, so Spring Awakening wasted its remaining strength on the Eastern Front. By 15 March 1945 Dietrich

had lost over 500 panzers and assault guns, 300 guns and 40,000 men trying to breach the Soviets' strong defences.

The Red Army launched its counterattack on 16 March along the entire front west of Budapest. Instead of throwing the Soviets back, 6th SS Panzer Army and 6th Army found themselves in danger of being cut off and a huge battle ebbed and flowed around Lake Balaton. In a repeat of the disaster at Stalingrad, Hitler's forces were once again let down by their allies. The inadequately equipped Hungarians on II SS Panzer Corps' left flank withdrew, with inevitable results.

There was nothing Dietrich could do to save the situation. "Up to this time the morale of the SS divisions had been good but now it cracked," observed Guderian. "The panzer troops continued to fight bravely but whole SS units, taking advantage of the cover thus offered, proceeded to retreat against orders." Under pressure Leibstandarte gave ground. Six days after the Soviet counter-offensive commenced, with just a mile-wide escape corridor Dietrich was faced with complete encirclement south of Székesfehérvár. Four panzer divisions and an infantry division fought to keep the Soviet pincers apart and 6th SS Panzer Army only just escaped.

## 'Thanks for everything'

Hitler could not believe that Himmler's tough Waffen-SS had failed him during this last-



Left: These captured SS men were suspected of killing Allied prisoners and slave labourers during the Battle of the Bulge

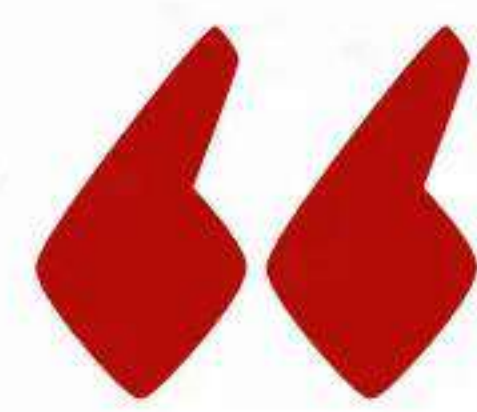
Far left: Soviet fighters fire a mortar during the final battle for Berlin, May 1945



ditch Hungarian campaign. "There could be no more reliance placed on such divisions," said Guderian. A furious Hitler declared: "If we lose the war, it will be his, Dietrich's fault." In a fit of further ingratitude, he ordered Guderian to fly to the front to instruct the exhausted troops of Leibstandarte, Das Reich, Totenkopf and Hohenstaufen to remove their SS arm-bands.

It is claimed that SS-Gruppenführer Hermann Fegelein urged Hitler to give the order to deliberately undermine Himmler's standing with the Waffen-SS. "Fegelein at the end made the most displeasing impression," said Guderian, who was appalled by Hitler's instructions and pointed out that the SS were under the jurisdiction of Himmler not the Wehrmacht. The spineless Himmler sent a message. Guderian noted: "Himmler did not win himself much love from the Waffen-SS over this affair."

Upon receiving the order Dietrich remarked with bitterness: "This is thanks for everything." He summoned his four divisional commanders and threw Hitler's message on the conference table, saying: "There's your reward for all that you have done the past five years." Dietrich instructed them not to pass the order on, but word of it quickly spread through the tattered ranks of his SS panzer divisions. Removal of unit insignia was largely symbolic, as they had already been removed when 6th SS Panzer Army deployed secretly into Hungary.



## ANGRY LEIBSTANDARTE OFFICERS ALSO SENT THEIR DECORATIONS BACK IN A CHAMBER-POT ALONG WITH A SEVERED ARM WEARING AN ADOLF HITLER ARM-BAND"

Nonetheless, Hitler's order was still seen as an insult by surviving SS veterans.

Dietrich's response was to inform Berlin that he would rather shoot himself than carry out the order. When he received no reply he reportedly sent all his decorations back to Hitler, though it is doubtful that the Führer, amidst all the chaos in Berlin, ever received them. As a result of this a subsequent rumour arose that angry Leibstandarte officers also sent their decorations back in a chamber-pot along with a severed arm wearing an Adolf Hitler arm-band. "6th SS Panzer Army is well-named, all right," lamented Dietrich bitterly. "It's only got six panzers."

### Streets of Berlin

Members of the SS defended Berlin to the very last against the Red Army in April 1945. SS-Brigadeführer Wilhelm Mohnke with a rag-tag force of some 2,000 men found himself holding the central government district including the old Reichstag and Reich Chancellery buildings, beyond the latter lay the Führerbunker. Hitler's immediate body guard, some 30-strong, came

under SS-Sturmbannführer Franz Schädle. The SS Hermann von Salza Battalion with a handful of Tiger IIs took up positions in the wooded Tiergarten in a desperate attempt to ward off Soviet tanks.

If Mohnke had time he would have reflected on his past glory days fighting with the Leibstandarte and Hitlerjugend divisions. Now he was witness to the final agonising collapse of the Waffen-SS. His men were far from the original elite SS, but rather a collection of units including Hitler's personal guard battalion from Leibstandarte, terrified Hitler Youth, despondent regular soldiers and Volkssturm home guard. He was ordered to fight to the death but only his few remaining hard-core German, Belgian, Danish, Dutch, French, Latvian, Spanish and Swedish Waffen-SS volunteers heeded such a pointless act of self-sacrifice.

Members of the French 33rd SS Charlemagne and Scandinavian 11th SS Nordland Divisions, under SS-Brigadeführer Gustav Krukenberg and SS-Brigadeführer Joachim Ziegler, rallied to the defence of

*SS soldiers shown during the Nazis' doomed attempt to halt the Soviet advance in Hungary, 1945*





Members of 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler pictured in Hungary 1945



SS men move through the ruins of Narva in Estonia, April 1944



Images © Alamy, Getty

Berlin. Also among the flotsam were several SS-companies of Spaniards under SS-Standartenführer Miguel Ezquerra, which were assigned to Nordland. When Krukenberg and a battalion of his men drove toward the city, Himmler passed by in his car without even acknowledging them. Such was his total disregard for these loyal foreign volunteers.

The III SS Panzer Corps, previously part SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner's short-lived 11th SS Panzer Army, north of Berlin was supposed to fight its way to rescue the Führer. Before his death Hitler signalled: "Upon the successful conclusion of your mission depends the fate of the German capital." However, Steiner's command had the manpower of a single division and he refused to cooperate. "The plan of attack was based on facts that had no basis in reality, but only in the fantasies of the Chancellery," said Steiner. When pressed he explained, "I just don't have the troops. I don't have the slightest chance of succeeding."

Instead Steiner ordered his men to withdraw toward the Elbe so they could surrender to the Americans and avoid Stalin's Gulag.

Hitler, in conference with his generals on 23 April 1945, stated, "I have no use for these dull, undecided SS leaders. In no

circumstances whatever do I want Steiner to be in command." Once Hitler fully appreciated that neither Steiner's forces nor the exhausted German 9th and 12th armies, trapped to the south of Berlin, were coming he cried in rage: "It's all finished, everything, everything..."

The once impressive military might of the Waffen-SS did Himmler no good in the end either. Hitler declared him a traitor after he foolishly named himself successor. Stripped of his titles, he withdrew humiliated to Flensburg protected by just 150 loyal guards. SS-Gruppenführer Hermann Fegelein, Himmler's SS representative at the Führer's headquarters, was arrested and shot for desertion. Hitler's ranting moved Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels to write: "In general, the Führer is of the opinion that no high-class commander has emerged from the SS."

## Last victory

Mohnke managed to give his demented Führer one final tiny victory on 27 April 1945 when his men bravely halted Soviet armour crossing the Potsdamer Platz. "Their tanks were highly unmanoeuvrable, blocked by rubble," reported Mohnke, "and were sitting ducks in this classic street fighting situation." Faced with this resistance, the Soviets simply withdrew

and shelled the defenders into submission. Krukenberg established his headquarters at the Stadtmitte U-Bahn station, but he soon came to regret his decision.

"On 27 April, a Russian artillery shell had exploded right in our midst in the station, killing four and wounding 15," he said. The following day SS-Sturmbannführer Schädle was hit in the leg by shrapnel and his wound soon went gangrenous.

Inevitably Mohnke's surviving SS were overwhelmed. The Red Army stormed the Reichstag and bludgeoned its way to within just a few blocks of the Chancellery. The latter was held by 700 members of the Leibstandarte guard force. Just to the north the Soviets reached the Hotel Adlon near the Wilhelm Strasse. By this stage most of the Tiergarten had been lost and the German positions on the Potsdamer Platz were almost completely surrounded. Only 17 French soldiers remained defending the Potsdamer railway station just south of the platz.

Mohnke received a phone call from SS-Unterscharführer Rochus Misch in the early hours of 30 April summoning him to see Hitler in the Führerbunker. "Unterscharführer, as an old Leibstandarte hand," said Mohnke, "please tell me the unvarnished truth. What temper is



the Führer in?" Misch responded: "Der Chef is now in a calm and relaxed mood. ... Just a moment ago he said he wanted to have a talk with his old friend Mohnke."

## 'Fought splendidly'

As instructed, Mohnke reported to the Führer and laid out a map that showed what remained of the Third Reich. He explained: "In the north the Russians have moved close to the Weidendammer Bridge. In the east they are at the Lustgarten. In the south, at Potsdamer Platz and the Aviation Ministry. In the west they are in the Tiergarten, somewhere between 170 and 250 feet from the Reich Chancellery."

Hitler nodded and asked how much longer the defence would last. "I no longer can guarantee that my exhausted, battle-weary troops can hold for more than one more day,"

replied Mohnke. Despite this news, Hitler found it in his heart to finally compliment the performance of the Waffen-SS. "Let me say that your troops have fought splendidly," he said, "and I have no complaints. Would that all the others had fought as tenaciously." Hitler took his own life that day. Mohnke attempted to breakout with his men, only to be caught by the Soviets. Krukenberg was also captured, while Ziegler died of his wounds.

It was feared that the SS might fight on despite Germany's surrender. Field Marshal

Kesselring, the new Commander-in-Chief West, said: "I had advised SS General Hausser as my special representative to see to it that the surrender of the SS troops proceeded in exact observance of my directives; that – in a nutshell – no follies, such as escape into the mountains, should be committed at the last moment." For good measure Kesselring signalled Dietrich at 1400 hours on 9 May 1945 stressing "the armistice terms are equally binding on the Waffen-SS". Their last stand was over.

**“LET ME SAY THAT YOUR TROOPS HAVE FOUGHT  
SPLENDIDLY AND I HAVE NO COMPLAINTS. WOULD THAT  
ALL THE OTHERS HAD FOUGHT AS TENACIOUSLY”** **Adolf Hitler to Wilhelm Mohnke**



*The SS were ordered by their superiors not to attempt "follies, such as escape into the mountains" when the Nazis surrendered*



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